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MY LADY CINDERELLA

BY

MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON

CO-AUTHOR OF

"Lady Betty Crosses the Water,"
"My Friend the Chauffeur,"
"The Lightning Conductor,"
"The Princess Passes," Etc.

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MY LADY CINDERELLA

CHAPTER I

THE DAY WHEN SOMETHING HAPPENED

To-day I had meant to be a happy day. But, after all, I was miserable. I would have given a great deal to be almost anywhere else—yes, even at home in Cousin Sarah East's villa in Peckham.

I had never thought of myself as a vain girl; but I suppose it was a morbid sort of vanity that induced so keen a pang of shamed distress on this glorious June day in the Park.

Anne Bryden, who had brought me, and proudly paid for the chairs to which we had found our way through the crowd, looked serenely blissful. She was not one whit depressed by the fact that she and I were the only ugly ducklings in this dazzling array of swans. Forgotten was her rusty black frock, with the cheap, pathetic jet trimming on the bodice; her last year's hat, with its faded pink roses, had practically ceased to exist.

It did not even occur to her that it might be well to give her shabby boots the protection of her skirt. This lack of self-consciousness struck me as scarcely short of greatness in Anne. It was almost above the level of the feminine, and far above the level of the Me.

It was not often that I could get a holiday from Cousin Sarah's babies, to whom I had the honour of being nursery governess—alias nursemaid—with a mingling of "general servant's" duties. There were no regular "days out" for me, but Cousin Sarah considered Anne "a most respectable young woman." (Anne had with unwonted diplomacy praised the house, admired the babies, and deferred to Cousin Sarah's opinion during the one visit I had received from her at Happiholme Villa.) Accordingly, this whole long June afternoon in her society had been granted.

I ought to have been radiant, revelling in the pretty faces, the prettier dresses, and the glittering equipages of my betters, but instead I sat wishing that I were not ashamed to ask Anne if she were ready to go away; concealing the mended finger-tips of my gloves by curling my hands into fists, and feeling utterly wretched that I, who adored beauty, must be so hopelessly out of the picture.

Carriage after carriage rolled by; well-groomed, clean-limbed men lounged over the railings, and raised their tall, shining hats to the occupants, or chatted with exquisitely-dressed girls, who looked like floating flowers, under their tinted chiffon and lace parasols. The rhododendrons were a flame of glorious colour; the distance was blue with the soft mist that hung, ineffable

and pensive, above the Serpentine, and the far, billowy reaches of sweet-smelling, new-cut grass in the Park.

"It's a nice world, isn't it?" remarked Anne, apropos of everything—everything but ourselves.

"Yes. And there are lots of nice times in it. Only we're not in any of them."

Anne looked critically at me.

"You ought to be, Con," she observed, after an interval of reflection. "As for me, I don't count. I'm nobody. I wasn't born to things, and I don't expect them. But you—you are different. You are a beauty. And you are a mystery. A book could be written about you."

I laughed a little.

"It would have to be a book for children. Nothing has ever happened to me since I was a child, and then —they were all sad things."

"But you are the sort of girl that things do happen to. They will yet; you mark my words."

I shook my head.

"Oh, if they only would! I'm so, so tired of Peckham. If something would happen to-day!"

"What would you like best to happen?" queried Anne.

"Am I to have my choice? Are you a fairy godmother in disguise? Well, I should say, Please, fairy godmother, you see that beauteous maiden in pink muslin, driving with her mother in the particularly desirable victoria?" (As I spoke my eyes focussed upon a wonderful girl who laughed haughtily, lazily conscious that she was one of Fortune's supreme favour-

ites.) "Well, then, dear fairy godmother, wave your magic wand which so sadly resembles a three-and-six-penny umbrella, and make me, if only for the space of one gorgeous month, like her. Give me as many Paris gowns, as much fun, as wild a whirl of gaiety, as she will enjoy this season. It isn't a very noble or exalted wish; but I'm in the mood for that, and nothing else, to-day."

Anne's chair was on my left. On my right, separated by a little distance, I had been conscious for the past half-hour of a vague cloudiness of silk and muslin that represented a woman. I had not actually glanced in her direction, but the corner of my eye had reflected a pale lavender fluff which was a sunshade. Now, suddenly, it was lifted, and a soft voice addressed me from underneath.

"Do forgive me, won't you? I really can't resist speaking. I don't want to be rude. On the contrary, I wish to be very nice. But—I couldn't help overhearing some of the things that you and your friend have been saying."

I felt the colour stealing up, as I racked my brain to recall exactly what we had been saying. Anne was staring in blank surprise; for this was a personage of great magnificence who was endeavouring to draw us into conversation, and no doubt Anne was wondering, even as I was wondering, what could be the motive of such apparently purposeless condescension.

The lady was of middle age—if women who frame their personal charms with the best can ever appear of middle age. She had elaborately undulated brown

hair, under a bonnet that was a poem, in one verse; bright, searching brown eyes, and a complexion that could still live up to its past. As for her gown, it was too exquisitely Parisian to have been made out of London.

"Don't look so horrified," she smiled. "I'm not mad, only a little eccentric. That means that some of my friends think me a genius. I wonder what you would think me if I suggested that you tried me as a fairy godmother?"

She spoke to me, not Anne. She did not even look at Anne after the first courteous, comprehensive glance.

"Why, I—I'm afraid I'd think you were making fun of me," I stammered, since some answer must be given.

"Then you'd be mistaken. I fancied, from some of the expressions which I involuntarily overheard, that you were not—well, not quite a conventional girl; that you had an original way of regarding life. If you have, we might cultivate each other's acquaintance with mutual advantage."

"I should find it more interesting to know you than you would to know me," I said meekly, for I felt as if I must have fallen asleep in my chair, and be dreaming.

"That remains to be seen. Your preface looks promising. Let's begin, if you don't mind, to cut each other's leaves. My name is Sophie de Gretton—Lady Sophie de Gretton, strangers call me. What is yours?

"Consuelo Brand," I answered.

I had never talked to a Lady Anybody in my life,

but though her aquiline nose and thin red line of lips might be formidable if she chose, she was easier to talk to than Cousin Sarah's friends in Peckham.

"What a queer name! Why did they call you Consuelo?"

I blushed vividly.

"My mother had had a great deal of trouble. She hoped I would be her consolation."

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I didn't mean to be prying. But it's my turn to impart information now. I live close by, in Park Lane. You can almost see my house from here. I strolled into the Park by myself because I wanted to think."

"And our chatter disturbed you."

"On the contrary, it has been most helpful—why, is my secret. But what do you say, you and your friend, to going home with me and having a talk over a cup of tea?"

My heart gave a little jump. Here was an adventure! The shabby nursery-governess from Peckham asked to tea with a Personage in Park Lane!

"I should like it immensely, thank you, and so would my friend, Anne Bryden, I'm sure."

I turned to Anne, but her face expressed disapproval. I could read her thoughts, and guessed that she was saying to herself: "Humph! how do we know that this bird of paradise isn't a sham? If she is really what she pretends to be, why on earth should she pick us up and invite us, after a ten minutes' conversation, to visit her? There's something pretty queer about this."

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS VISITOR

ANNE, whom I had known ever since my dear dead mother and I had stopped at the boarding-house which her mother kept, was now a mixture of typewriter, secretary, and companion to a vulgar, newly-rich matron engaged in storming the outworks of society, and it was part of Anne's duty, I remembered, to read aloud endless columns of society gossip, bristling with titles. Probably she was familiar with that of Lady Sophie de Gretton, who lived in Park Lane, and believed that our eccentric new friend was for some nefarious purpose of her own masquerading in borrowed plumage.

"I'm afraid," she replied stiffly to the question in my eyes, "that it's rather late, and we ought to be getting home. We don't live in Park Lane, and we've a long way to go."

"Come alone, Miss Brand, if your friend has no time to spare," suggested the lady in lavender.

It was a temptation. Never would such a chance be thrown in my way again; my future was bounded by Peckham. Yet I could not leave Anne.

"Don't you think we might, dear?" I pleaded. "I won't go without you. But—it would be pleasant."

"I wouldn't dream of letting you go alone," said Anne, with the air of preserving me from a death-trap. "If you really wish it so much, I dare say we might manage a few minutes."

Lady Sophie de Gretton rose.

"We won't delay, then, if you haven't much time to spend, for I have several things to say which I think will surprise and interest you."

Anne walked along, keeping those big gray eyes of hers wide open. I hoped Lady Sophie did not realise that she was waiting to see whether we should indeed be led into Park Lane.

But we were led there, and stopped before a quaint, pretty little white house, sandwiched in between two big ones, its windows blossoming with pink and white geraniums, and frothing over with snowy, frilled curtains. So far the adventure seemed genuine; and the footman who opened the door (respectfully addressing our companion as "my lady") was grand enough to convince even Anne.

We passed through a miniature hall, whose walls could not be seen for exquisite engravings, went up half a stairway, and had the door of a fairy bower thrown open for us. Cousin Sarah East would have scorned chintz for her parlour in Peckham, where she had a "suite" of saddlebag, or something else that sounded horsy to the ear; but Lady Sophie de Gretton's drawing-room was all white and green and rosy and ruffly with chintz.

We sat down, I feeling more conscious of my dusty old boots and serge, white round the seams, than ever,

Presently the footman brought tea, with strawberries and cream and tiny cakes, and quantities of silver that looked imposingly ancestral.

"Now for business!" exclaimed Lady Sophie, when I had grown more and more dazed with the thought that I was dreaming her, and Anne's shrewd little brown face had relaxed into a mingling of curiosity and good nature.

It was to be business, then! I was stabbed with humiliating dread lest Lady Sophie de Gretton were on the committee of a girls' friendly society, and had gathered us in as likely candidates. She had a brusque way of speaking, despite her low, sweet voice, and she went on abruptly:

"You haven't told me yet where you live."

"In another world," I retorted. "They call it Peckham."

"Do you like this better?"

"Yes," entering into the spirit of the catechism.

"How would you like to have that wish of yours granted—as I hinted it might be, if you would trust to my wand—and live here, surrounded by the joys which I heard you cataloguing to your fairy godmother? Now, don't fall into error again, and fancy I'm making fun of you, for I'm not. I'm asking you a serious question, and I want a serious answer."

A curious tingling chill was creeping up from my finger-tips.

"I—I don't think I understand you," I heard somebody say, and was dimly aware that the somebody could only be myself.

"Yes, you do. If you are dumfounded, it is because you are a singularly modest young woman. Turn round; glance at that mirror on the wall near you, and see whether you can guess why a rather lonely, eccentric person, who is tired of most things and pines for variety, might be seized wilth a sudden violent desire to have you for—for a new doll to play with?"

I did not take her at her word, and glance mirrorward, for I was familiar enough with the reflection I should have met there; though, to be sure, I only saw it in small, greenish sections at home. I was not ignorant of the fact that I was pretty, or might be pretty, in a decent dress; but I had not suspected that I was pretty enough to triumph over the combined hat (which the youngest East had sat on in a rage this morning), boots and serge.

"You don't answer. Don't you think your people would let you come for a while?"

"I have no people. Only a cousin, who doesn't like any one to know that we're cousins. When she is angry she says she 'keeps me out of charity.' When I answer her back, I say that I more than earn my own living. Sometimes she tells me she wishes I were out of her sight forever. I don't know whether she means it or not, but I do not suppose she could force me to stay if I were determined to go."

I made these explanations jerkily, and then, at the end, before Lady Sophie de Gretton could comment upon them, I broke out:

"But why—why do you say such strange things to me, whom you never saw till an hour ago? There

are thousands of girls whom you know who would love to come and visit you—poor girls, perhaps, yet in your own class of life. Why do you put such ideas in my head when you must feel, if you stop to think, that by to-night you will be sorry, and have to disappoint the poor 'doll' you wanted to play with?"

"My mind is made up," she quietly returned. "As for the 'why—why" which you fling at me, can't you be satisfied with the explanation I have given? I've set my heart on having you to play with. You are the prettiest doll in the whole shop, and I hope to get you comparatively cheap."

"But what would you do with me?"

"Oh, put you into pretty frocks, take you about with me, and show you off."

"There must be some other reason."

I had not meant to speak aloud, for the words sounded ungracious. But they broke forth without my volition.

Lady Sophie's handsome face flushed, and she bit her lip. For an instant her eyes appeared to flinch from mine, and suspicion, vague, yet sharply pinching, clutched my perturbed spirit.

"Well, if you must have it, my fancy for you arose partly from a resemblance to some one I used to know and admire years ago. I noticed it the instant I saw you in the Park, and though you did not guess that I observed you, I hardly took my eyes from your face, peeping under the frills on my sunshade, until I spoke to you. Now that I've exhibited myself as a woman of sentiment—a creature I despise—are you satisfied?"

Perforce, I had to answer falteringly that I was. But suspicion, once roused, would not be put to sleep again so soon. There was a look in Lady Sophie de Gretton's eyes which told me (or I morbidly imagined it) that there was still something concealed under her most unexpected, most astonishing offer. I felt this electrically, yet I would not listen to the subdued whisperings.

What if there were something else? What did it matter? What did anything matter if this transformation of my life could come about? I was intoxicated by the cup that she held out to me, and I would have been ready to drink it down to the dregs —if only I need not taste the dregs quite yet.

"I must be hard to please if I were not satisfied," I said. "But I'm so bewildered, you must forgive me. Only tell me, since you say this is real and serious, what I am to do."

"You are to get leave, and come to stop with me, as soon as you can."

"Oh, for how long? A week—a fortnight—if you won't mind my asking?"

"Would it be worth while your offending your Peckham relative and losing a home for a fortnight?"

I drew in my breath. The room swam before my eyes.

"Yes!" I cried recklessly. "It would be worth it all—for that. For a fortnight I should have lived. I should 'have had my day,' and surely something, some sort of work, would turn up later."

"Brava! you're a girl after my own heart. You

are a woman who dares. I was only trying you. I'd keep you longer than a fortnight. Just how long, I'm too honest, Miss Brand, to pretend to settle now. It would depend on many things."

Again her eyes dropped away from mine as if their falling lashes would hide something of mystery. But I was used to mystery. I had had it in my own life, so close, so intimate a companion, that familiarity had bred contempt—or carelessness.

"Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof; and you would have to trust me to see that your future prospects at Peckham or elsewhere were not endangered. Meanwhile I can promise you this: While your visit lasts you shall have everything that the most spoiled and petted girl could ask for—quite as much as the one you took for an example in speaking to your friend in the Park. By the way, I know her well, and you shall know her too, if you wish, though I warn you she doesn't easily tolerate rivals, and you will be so dangerous a one that the rose of her acquaintance may have its thorns."

I wonder if a spirit of prophecy had entered into Lady Sophie de Gretton, that she should have made use of just those words?

As she spoke the door opened, and the footman who had brought in tea appeared.

"Sir George Seaforth, my lady——" he had decorously begun, when his mistress sprang up impulsively, her face flushing. Her eyes darted to the doorway, well-nigh blocked by the man's padded shoulders, and so doing her features slightly relaxed.

The visitor was, at all events, not close behind the servant, and for some reason she was glad of the respite.

"Where is he?" she questioned, a slight quiver in her voice.

"I showed Sir George into the boudoir, your ladyship, thinking you were engaged."

"Ah!" with a little relieved sigh. "That was right, William. I will see him there in a few minutes."

William vanished; the door closed; Lady Sophie remembered us. But there was a subtle change in her manner.

"It is settled, then?" she asked.

Her tone was almost impatient, and, as soon as I had murmured "Yes," she hurried on:

"Good! Can you get away the day after to-morrow? Ah, I'm very pleased. I will—but no, on second thoughts, for several reasons, perhaps I'd better not drive to Peckham for you. You shall come here, but don't bother about—er—much packing. It will amuse you to choose a new outfit with me. I may depend on you? Then I won't keep you and Miss —er—Bryden longer now, as she is in haste; and I've an early dinner, for a theatre party to dress for, too. Good-bye, or, rather, au revoir!"

Before we knew what had happened we had been cordially shaken hands with, William had been rung for to show us out, and we were in the warm June sunlight of Park Lane again, banished from fairyland, humbly waiting for an omnibus.

"Why was she in such a hurry to get rid of us?"

queried Anne. "And why was she so pleased because the footman had shown that man into another room?"

My ears tingled with the sting of my conviction.

"She was ashamed to have any one see us in our dowdy clothes. And that brute of a William was ashamed, too. That's why."

"Oh, do you think so? I don't. It goes deeper than that. Mark my words, Con: there's a mystery of some sort, and the man who called is mixed up in it. Don't go to stop with that woman, dear. It's all too fantastic. No good can come of it, but maybe dreadful harm to you."

No wonder that Anne's words struck coldly on my heart. It was odd that she, as well as I, should have suspected something hidden, for Lady Sophie de Gretton's explanation, though eccentric, had sounded frank enough. I would not have given up my new prospects, chimerical as they still appeared, unwise as it was, according to an old proverb, to exchange "a bird in the hand for two in the bush," but since the entrance of the footman to announce a visitor my excitement had been dying down. Now I felt chilled and unhappy, yet obstinate.

"I can't help it," I said sulkily. "It's done now, for good or evil. I wish an omnibus would come."

But at an unseen distance something had happened, and there was a block in the stream of traffic. Not an omnibus was in sight, and none of the carriages packed into Hamilton Place were able to move out into Piccadilly. Anne and I were obliged to stand

close by the curbstone waiting, and though I was in too reckless a mood to care whether I were late in arriving at Happiholme Villa or not, I was also too impatient to tolerate waiting. I wanted to be off; I wanted to be going somewhere, anywhere. Anne and I could only be together in an omnibus for a certain length of time; we must then separate, she proceeding in one direction, I in another.

Only a little while ago I had disliked the idea of parting with her; now I welcomed it, for I did not wish her to continue her conscientious efforts at dissuasion. We might have walked on at this juncture, allowing an omnibus finally to overtake us, and Anne suggested the plan, only to have it vetoed by me. If we walked she would have plenty of opportunity for further argument; in an omnibus, where all our neighbours might hang upon our words, private conversation would be impracticable.

So we stood still, I feverishly discussing the hats and frocks in the carriages packed along the waiting line, and nearly ten minutes must have passed before a movement ahead became perceptible. We were still close to Lady Sophie de Gretton's when at last the omnibus we desired came in sight.

It was rattling along at great speed to make up for lost time, and, as the driver seemed disinclined to see our insignificance, I boldly dashed out to head it off before the more cautious Anne had left the pavement.

I had stretched out my hand to grasp the rail, when an impatient cab-horse intercepted me. I sprang back

startled, and felt my shoulders come in contact with something just behind.

A woman on top of the omnibus uttered a shrill squeal of alarm, and the sound of her voice, the expression of her eyes, which for a bewildered instant I saw were fixed on me, robbed me of my presence of mind.

I thought that I was going to be run over. In imagination I felt myself knocked down, wheels crunching over my spine. The whole world seemed made of horses—rearing horses, horses with tossing heads and trampling hoofs. The street was a sea of horses.

They were everywhere—in front, behind, coming from both sides; go where I would, I could not escape. I shut my eyes and threw up my hands, conscious in an odd, bewildered way, even at that instant, that I had dropped my umbrella, and should never be able to buy another, if I lived to want it.

People were shouting this and that at me; I only heard their voices, not their words, and they all sounded angry, unsympathetic, as if they were annoyed that I had got in their way, not that they cared what became of me.

It could not have lasted sixty seconds, though I had thought of so many things (even feeling a pang of regret that this had not happened after instead of before my glorious visit to Lady Sophie de Gretton, now to be lost forever under the horses' hoofs), when I was caught up bodily and planted in safety on the pavement. It was a strong arm that held me, and until a mist cleared away from my eyes I

thought my stammered thanks were due to a big policeman; but though the policeman was there, having arrived the fraction of a second too late, it was not to him that I owed my deliverance.

"'Twas that gentleman there, not me," he explained, with a gruffness born of my reckless conduct, which deserved all the punishment it had received. My impression was that, if any one merited a scolding, it was the omnibus driver for not looking, or the first cabman, who had come so near to using me for a ninepin. But they had both contrived to disappear, and I should have been censured by the guardian of the law, had not "that gentleman" gallantly interfered.

"Oh, I say, bobby, don't be an idiot," he succinctly remarked, and, having disposed of the policeman, turned to me. "I do hope you're not hurt."

"No, I think not, thanks to you!" I faltered. "It was so stupid of me. But you were very good, and —I'm all right now. Come, Anne, we will take this next omnibus."

"Won't you let me call you a cab? You look awfully white and shaken," said the man.

I was about to refuse, but Anne seconded his suggestion. Yes, we would have a cab. And in another moment, with a motion of the stick he carried, our new friend had summoned a hansom.

The crowd, which had paused for the excitement of seeing me killed, had passed on, defrauded. All was quiet again in Hamilton Place, and I thought that there were none remaining who cared to stare, as my

knight in tall hat and frock-coat extended his service by helping me into the vehicle.

But, after all, I was mistaken. Just as he stood, his hat lifted, inquiring with interest in his eyes whither he should direct the cabman to drive, a victoria approached us. By a coincidence which seemed odd to me (and afterwards was to seem far more so), it contained the wonderful girl in pink muslin. She and the woman by her side—her mother, I was certain —were gazing indifferently into space, when the eyes of the former fell upon my champion.

Her features quickened suddenly into life; her gaze travelled from the man standing by the cab to me, at whom she continued to look with keen curiosity, tempered by disapproval. Then she whispered a word to her companion. The elder woman glanced in my direction, and—a strange thing happened.

CHAPTER III.

THE HAUNTING VICTORIA

WHAT there could have been in my appearance to cause her emotion I could not guess; but the well-preserved face, under the exquisite bonnet, seemed actually to shrivel. She stared, with widening eyes, her jaw falling in that unattractive, yet pathetic, way seen when the spirit loses control of the body in sleep.

I observed this queer, unrehearsed dramatic effect, in vivid surprise, and forgot to answer the question that had been asked. Anne replied for me; and I heard her giving her own address as the one to which we desired the cabman should drive us—heard it half unconsciously, without room in my mind for more surprise; though afterwards, when it appeared that much was to hang upon such a trifle, I remembered.

The driver was duly informed, and we left my knight standing on the pavement, looking after us with a parting smile. It was a very pleasant smile; and for the first time it struck me that the man was handsome. I had been too dazed, too excited, to notice him before, save to gather an impression that he was a gentleman.

"He's rather nice, I think," I remarked languidly

to Anne, sinking back, with a sense of rest after storm, upon the unwonted luxury of cab cushions.

"Rather nice?" she echoed contemptuously. "Where are your eyes? He's splendid. He's my ideal of what a man ought to be. I'll bet anything he's a soldier. Oh, the difference between him and the dreadful men —the Things—who come to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's!"

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was the lady with whom she lived; but never before had I known Anne to be so enthusiastic about a mere man.

"I suppose my eyes were otherwise engaged," I excused myself. "There was such a curious thing, just as we were bidding him good-bye (I hope I remembered to thank him properly again!): a woman in a victoria—we'd seen her in the Park, but she didn't see us—stared at me, and behaved in the most extraordinary manner. One would have fancied I was a ghost. She looked awful; I can't think of any other word."

"She probably had a stitch in her side, or a twinge of neuralgia," said Anne prosaically. "You wanted things to happen to-day, and they have happened. They've gone to your head a little, my dear. You mustn't expect to find a new excitement wherever you turn your eyes, on the principle of 'It never rains but it pours.'"

"She did look at me strangely—very strangely," I persisted.

"Well, you're not exactly plain."

"There she is again!" I exclaimed eagerly. "I do believe she's following us."

"Nonsense!" retorted Anne. "There are dozens of victorias coming this way. Why not hers?"

There was common-sense in Anne's words, but somehow I could not be convinced. The victoria was abreast of our hansom; though its elder occupant wore a surface air of composure, she was alert, watchful, and her cold eyes lighted as they met mine.

I said no more to Anne, for I could not prove my assertion; and I knew that she fancied my experiences of the afternoon had sown the seeds of conceit in my heart.

She was inclined to talk of the man from whom we had just parted, and I encouraged the tendency, since it took her mind from my affairs. At the place where we should have changed into different omnibuses, I insisted on getting out, as Anne was to pay for the cab.

We bade each other good-bye, and I hailed my omnibus. As I did so, I threw a furtive glance behind. The victoria was still in sight.

For a moment I hesitated, and then ascended to the top of the omnibus. From a coign of vantage on the back seat I could from time to time observe the progress of events. If it were really by chance that the victoria with the two ladies was coming in this direction, it would soon overtake and leave the humble omnibus far behind. If not—and I were right instead of Anne—I might prove my wild theory after all.

I racked my brain for some motive to account for the elder woman's interest in me, taking for granted that it actually existed. The daughter had certainly

observed with some eagerness the young man who had been speaking with us: she had whispered to her mother, who had at once exhibited uncontrollable feeling.

Could it be, I wondered, that my knight was this pretty girl's husband? that she was jealous, and, suspecting an acquaintance between him and me, had induced her mother (the typical, suspicious mother-in-law of the flirtatious, farce-comedy husband) to track me to my lair?

He had been as far as possible from resembling this farce-comedy, gay dog of a young man; on the contrary, he had been, as Anne said, soldierly, brown, serious, with gray eyes that looked as if they might be very much in earnest. But I could think of no other solution to the puzzle, and in accepting it I lost the thrill of mystery in the chase. A chase, however, it undoubtedly was. I was not too far away, perched up in my high seat, to observe, when I ventured to glance behind me, the expression on the faces of coachman and groom.

It was contemptious resignation; every weary feature said that never before had they been expected to dance attendance on a vulgar omnibus. I thought they might even go so far as to give a month's notice when they reached home.

Suddenly something impish entered into my breast, and it occurred to me that it would be amusing to try an experiment. I ran down the winding staircase of the omnibus, and, undismayed by my late mishap, jumped off before it stopped.

Another was coming, and was just in the act of turning a corner which would take it in quite a different direction. I was in time to board it. I wondered if "they" had observed this manœuvre, and whether they would presently be seen pursuing. Yes, there was the victoria! The girl and her mother were talking together with animation, in strong contrast to the languor of their mien when first we had met, before they had been waked to this odd interest, which I was not yet sure that I understood.

I had not lingered to ask the destination of this second conveyance, but, when the conductor appeared to demand my fare, I discovered that it was taking me away from, rather than towards, Peckham. I should be late, and Mrs. East would be angry. Nevertheless, I would play the game out now.

My money was running low, and I had only a few pence left, or, at the end of the route, I might have been tempted further to prolong the hunt. As it was, there remained nothing to do but to repair to Peckham, after stepping into a shop, expending a halfpenny for a paper, and remaining inside as long as I could, to account for my visit to this part of the town. Somehow, I was unwilling for the pursuers to know that I had been deliberately misleading them; though why it mattered I could scarcely have explained to myself.

At the corner of Chesley Street, where I lived, I beheld the inevitable victoria driving slowly past. I walked through my gate, up the steps to the door, but, changing my mind, ran down again and gazed towards

the end of the street. There the carriage had stopped, before a bakery and postoffice. At the moment of my appearance the groom was coming out of the latter with a telegraph form in his hand. His mistress took it, and seemed to write.

I would have lingered at the open gate to see what might be next in the programme, but at this instant I was hailed by a familiar voice. It was that of Jimmy East, my one friend at Happiholme Villa.

"Oh, I say, ain't you goin' to catch it!" he ejaculated, appearing at the front-door. "Ma's just savage because you're late. What are you dong out there, anyhow—afraid to come in?"

"No," I replied sedately, ascending the steps with such dignity as I could command.

But my heart was beating somewhat faster than its wont. It was all well enough to tell myself, at a safe distance from Mrs. East, that I could now, for the first time, afford to brave her displeasure. But the habit of years had gripped me again, with my return to the old environment. I would not for a great deal that Jimmy should guess it; but in truth my soul melted within me as I crossed the threshold.

I had a curious feeling that I had come back from another world; or perhaps I experienced the sensations of an opium-eater, awaking to dull, headachy realities after a dazzling panorama of dreamland. The smell of the stuffy little passage depressed me more than ever before—that indescribable reminiscence of dinners past, present, and to come. How narrow it was! how hideous the paper on the wall, representing marble!

how grim the linoleum on the floor, which masqueraded unsuccessfully as mosaic!

"She's upstairs in our room, puttin' baby to bed," volunteered Jimmy, in an awestruck tone. No need for more particular classification. There was only one omnipresent, reigning She at Happiholme! "She said you were to go right up to her the instant minute you came in, Connie. I was put to wait at the drawrin'-room window to watch for you."

"Very well, I'm going," I responded, and set my foot upon the stairs.

There was a bad half-hour in store for me, I was aware, and I could have found it in my heart to wish that Mr. East were at home.

Mr. East was only my cousin Sarah's husband, in Peckham; but in wider spheres he was a commercial traveller. When he abode at Happiholme I desired his absence, for his carpet slippers and his dressing-gown got upon my nerves. Besides, he had a disagreeable habit of patting me on the shoulder and remarking on the colour of my hair or my eyes when his wife was not in the room.

But, at least, he did his cowardly best to stand between me and Cousin Sarah's wrath; and things undoubtedly went more smoothly during his vists than when he was away inducing provincial firms to order a certain brand of soap.

If he were here to-night—but he wasn't; and so there was no use in wishing.

The room which Jimmy East, Emmy East, Baby East, and I shared as a bedchamber was up under

the eaves of the villa, with a ceiling that slanted in unexpected places, and attempted to knock one's brains out if one arose in the darkness to soothe the baby's cries.

Adjoining was the abode of the one servant, whose many tasks it was part of my daily duty to lighten. I went upstairs heavily, past the floor where Mr. and Mrs. East's domain and the "spare bedroom" did their best to grace a self-respecting Peckham villa. Before the top of the second flight, the voice of Cousin Sarah rang out through the closed door:

"Nasty, ungrateful hussy! She'll know it when she gets an afternoon out again!"

This was a challenge, though she was only haranguing Emmy and the baby; and it ought to have spurred my failing courage. But there was something spiritually relaxing to me in the air at Happiholme. It was a white-faced coward who reluctantly opened the door and prepared to "face the music."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. East (she did not approve of being addressed more familiarly), that I'm late," I said; "I didn't think it would be Mousie's bedtime yet."

She had been sitting by the wash-hand stand with her back to me, but she flounced her chair round, and turned a flushed, virago face upon me.

"Oh, you've deigned to come back, have you? I wonder you didn't stop away a little longer, dine at the Savoy, and go to a box at the Opera. This is what I get for being good-natured, and letting you go trapesing about town, while I stay at home and look after your business."

Of course, her children were my business; at all events, I should hardly have breath enough to dispute the assertion against her. I therefore quietly took off my hat and gloves, and advanced to retrieve the baby, who had now begun to yell under his mother's fierce jerkings and pullings. But Mrs. East snatched him back against her ample breast.

"Now that I've done all the work, you'd step in and get the credit, would you?" she snapped. "Let me alone. I'll finish what I've begun. But this day's been a lesson to me. I'm tired of giving away my food and my house-room for nothing. You don't get out again, to defy me, in a hurry, my lady."

Her tone, her words, were unbearably insulting. Coward that I was, and had too often been in the presence of this big grenadier of a woman, who looked too large for her own house, my blood leaped now; and my ears tingled as if she had boxed them.

An instant ago I had not meant to speak of what had happened to-day, what was to follow a few days later, until she should be in a more promising temper. But in my anger I lost my shrinking dread of her, and was bitten with the temptation to fling in her fierce face the knowledge that somewhere I was wanted and appreciated, if not here.

CHAPTER IV

I FLING DOWN THE GAUNTLET TO FATE

"I HAVE never wished nor attempted to defy you, Mrs. East," I said, trying to speak calmly, though my voice trembled. "But there is a limit even to my endurance. I am not a slave; I am of your own flesh and blood, and by hard work from early morning till late at night I have earned over and over again the food, the shelter, you so grudgingly allow me. Now——"

"Upon my word!" she broke in, beating me down with her loud vituperation. "You'd answer me back, would you? 'My flesh and blood,' you call yourself? A third cousin—that's all you are—is no cousin at all. For years I've kept you out of charity, ever since your mother—a poor, useless invalid, no good to herself or anybody else, for all her fine boastings—died in a railway carriage and left you on the world. This is the reward I get for it; but that's life—that's life, I suppose. Of course you've been made to work; you couldn't expect to sit idle all day while I slaved for you. But you've not done half what a hired nursemaid would have done. Henry East's silly kindness has spoiled you. I could get in a girl and pay her four shillings a week, not a quarter as much as your clothes and your pocket-money have cost me—yes, I could get

her in to-morrow, and she'd do better without any practice than you do after five years."

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I was born with a sense of humour, so that, little merriment as was in my heart, I was seized with a sudden hysterical gust of laughter at Mrs. East's boast of generously given "pocket-money." She had been known to deal me out a postage-stamp at a time for a letter to Mrs. Bryden or Anne; and she had sat sulkily by talking of her own financial sacrifices for her family's sake, while her husband tossed a shilling into my plate at breakfast. But she had no sense of humour, and, not fathoming the cause of my laughter, it infuriated her the more. She glared and swallowed hard, but I did not yet allow her to begin again.

"Wait," I exclaimed; "I have something to say now, Mrs. East. As it will be so easy for you to fill my place, you will be glad to hear that I have made up my mind to relieve you from the burden of my presence at the end of the week. It is only fair to give you so much notice, I think, and for the children's sake——"

"How dare you!" she flung at me. "You go away! you leave a good home like this! Catch you doing it. You know too well which side your bread's buttered, though I've the best mind in the world to take you at your word——"

"I want nothing else," I asseverated. "Indeed, I have wished for long to go. To-day an opportunity has been afforded me. I have had a—a most advantageous offer."

She began to look at me sharply, the "boiled gooseberry" eyes, which had such an unpleasant, catty fascination for me, snapping with anger.

"Ah!" she sneered, "perhaps the Queen has begged you to come and be a maid of honour?"

"Really, you are not so far wrong," I retorted. "A lady—a woman of title—has invited me to pay her a visit—a long visit. After that she has intimated that she will help me find work."

"Of all—the—liars—you are the worst and the most barefaced, Consuelo Brand. 'Brand' indeed! I always did say it meant the brand of Satan."

The blood rushed so hotly to my face that the tears were forced, stinging, to my eyes.

"Leave my room, woman!" I exclaimed, pointing to the door; "for while I am here in this house it is and shall be mine."

I had hardly known what I was saying, but when the full force of my temerity swept over me, I was not even then dismayed. An end was coming now; the earth quaked in the old world that I had known.

She slid the frightened, whimpering two-year-old from her knees, and springing to her feet, towered above me.

"You brat! you charity child! you nameless waif!" she choked, "you tell me to leave this room! I tell you to leave my house, not in a week, not to-morrow, but now, this minute. Out you go!"

I faced her, quivering.

"Do you mean it?"

"As much as I mean that I'm sick to death of you.

Not a stick of luggage do you wait for. It can be sent after you to your lady of title. Bah! you make me ill. Go!"

I shut my lips together without a word. I do not think that I could have spoken then if I would. A shower of glittering sparks seemed to be falling before my eyes; but, fumbling, I found my hat and put it on. My gloves, too, which lay beside it on the bed, I mechanically picked up, crushing them in my hand. Then, without turning to look back, I left the room.

Outside in the passage the whirlwind of my quick, blind flight knocked against something, and tumbled it over. Startled, I collected my faculties sufficiently to see Jimmy, who had thus been punished for listening at the keyhole, and to help him to his feet.

He sneaked downstairs at my side, his small six-year-old body striving to hide itself in my skirt as we went. Halfway down, a strident voice from above hurled some inarticulate abuse after me, but I neither paused nor looked up, and Jimmy only cuddled the closer.

At the front-door the little boy clung to me with desperate, grimy hands.

"Don't go—don't go, Connie!" he implored. "Maybe she'll be sorry to-morrow. Anyhow, I love you, and I'll be better to you after this if you'll stay, so'll pa. I'll tell him on her, see if I don't. Connie, I can't get along without you—honest true I can't."

CHAPTER V

I MAKE A MISTAKE

GENTLY, but firmly, I loosened Jimmy's little hands.

"I'm sorry to leave you, dear," I said. "But after what's happened to-night I can't stay any longer. I won't forget you. And by-and-by I'll write you a letter to your own name. If I have any money, I'll send you a present, too."

Jimmy's tea s ceased to fall.

"Will you, true's you live?"

"Yes. And perhaps I shall come back to see you one day in a carriage. Who knows?"

I bent and kissed him, despite the smudges with which his small face was ever adorned, save at early morning. Then, before he could grasp me again, I had put him away, and closed the door between us. Running down the steps, and out at the gate, I hurried away in the gathering twilight, hardly realizing that the dust of Happiholme Villa had indeed been shaken from my feet.

For a long time I flew on, aimless, panting, paying no heed to the way I went. But at last sheer fatigue caused my speed to slacken, and with a shock of surprise it dawned upon me that I did not know where to go.

I had told Lady Sophie de Gretton that I must give Mrs. East a few days' notice before leaving her children, after a residence of five years in her house. Lady Sophie would doubtless have arranged matters in accordance with that expressed intention of mine, so that now it might be inconvenient for her if I were to make my appearance earlier, announcing that I had come to stay.

At all events, it would be impossible for me to go to Park Lane to-night, as she had mentioned that she was dining out, with a theatre party afterwards. Clearly it would not do to arrive in her absence, with only the servants at home, nor could I hang about the door, like a tramp, until twelve o'clock or so, when she might be expected to return.

I began to feel a little frightened, though I by no means regretted my precipitancy in leaving that most inappropriately-named domicile, Happiholme. In my shabby purse, which I had possessed since before my dear mother's tragic death, coyly nestled one penny, one halfpenny, and an impracticable farthing. As I walked on more slowly I examined and thought over these resources.

With the malicious contrariness of human nature, though I could not have eaten the most delicate morsel a few moments ago had it been temptingly served to me in Mrs. East's house, I now began poignantly to feel that I was hungry.

A clock over a cheap jeweller's shop told me that it was half-past eight. I had lunched hastily at twelve on a piece of bread and cheese before going out to join

Anne, and I had been far too much excited at Lady Sophie de Gretton's to do more than crumble a bit of icing on my tiny cake as I tasted the tea in one of her Dresden cups.

Oh, how faint I was beginning to be! How my head throbbed, and how desolate I was! A brilliant destiny might be fluttering before me, like a Will-o'-the-wisp, but the present brought tears of loneliness to my eyes. I did not know what I was to do, where I might hope to spend the night.

If Mrs. Bryden had still kept the boarding-house in Bloomsbury, where my mother and I had lived for several years, I might now have gone there. Mrs. Bryden would gladly have accommodated me for a night or two, and let me pay when I could. But she had moved to Surbiton, and I had no money for my railway fare, so that it was hopeless to think of finding shelter with her.

Some people spent their nights in wandering up and down, or dropping into a troubled doze upon the seats on the Embankment, I knew; but I had not the courage to face such an experience, and finally, with extreme reluctance, I permitted the thought of Mrs. Leatherby-Smith to grow within my mind. I had never seen Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, though I seemed to know her only too well from Anne's description of her employer, and I had no reason to believe, from the knowledge which I possessed, that she would give her companion-secretary's insignificant friend a warm welcome.

Still, much as I disliked exacting a grudging favour,

I thought it would be preferable to entreat Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's hospitality for one night rather than walk the streets, or apply to a Refuge for Homeless Young Women—all spelled with capital letters.

Whatever I did, it was clear that I could not present myself at Lady Sophie de Gretton's till next day at earliest, and Mrs. Leatherby-Smith appeared to be my only other hope. I might sleep with Anne, I reflected, and, after all, I need not make trouble for any one else in the house.

Having once arrived at a decision, I felt better. But the next thing was to reach Addison Road, where Mrs. Leatherby-Smith lived. A penny would not take me half the distance in an omnibus, but I must ride as far as I could, and accomplish the rest of the journey on foot. My remaining halfpenny I expended at a baker's upon a cake so stodgy as to be particularly filling at the price, and ate it, furtive and abject, at a street corner while waiting for the 'bus to come in sight.

As I did so, with such poor pretence of jauntiness as I could maintain, I thought of Lady Sophie de Gretton, and of the two dainty occupants of the mysterious victoria, wondering grimly what would be their impression if they could see me now.

Somewhat revived, I was ready to make the necessary exertion, when the omnibus had brought me as far as it would for a penny, and I had to descend and walk.

It was a very long walk, which I made still longer by losing my way more than once. Weary, faint, and

miserably doubtful of my reception, I was almost too far gone, when at last I reached Addison Road, to rejoice that I was so near my journey's end.

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, who had occupied a suite in a fashionable hotel, when first she came to London for the season (which meant so much to her nouveau riche ambition), had not been long in Addison Road; but I had written to Anne since her arrival, and I was sure of the address.

"Holland Park House" was the name which I had scrawled on one or two envelopes during the past four weeks; and now, seeing the two words, "Holland Park," glittering in gold letters on a tall iron gateway, I did not wait to let my eyes travel further along the line, but ventured inside.

A short drive led up to a large building of brick and stone, dignified with a deep porch, the roof of which was supported by massive pillars. I knew that Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was lavish of the money left her by a deceased Birmingham husband, and that she had chosen a place in Addison Road expressly that she might be able to give garden parties; but I had hardly expected to see such an imposing mansion as this. It looked big enough for two or three Mrs. Leatherby-Smiths to give parties all at the same time.

Big double doors stood hospitably open. Within, other doors, half composed of jewelled glass, were tightly closed. A light shone through, and here and there in the house other lights filtered through drawn curtains; but many windows were dark. Probably, I thought, Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was out; but Anne

would be at home, and not yet in bed, as it was not much after ten o'clock.

I touched an electric bell, and an elderly man, in a plain, businesslike livery, answered my ring.

"Is—is Miss Bryden at home?" I hesitated.

The man looked puzzled.

"Miss Bryden? I don't know the name," was his reply.

"She is Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's companion."

The cloud of his bewilderment did not lift.

"Is Mrs. Leatherby-Smith visiting here?" he inquired, with an air of painful conscientiousness. "We have no tenant by that name, miss."

"But this is Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's house, isn't it?" I questioned hastily. "Surely Holland Park House——"

"Ah, you've made a mistake, then. This is Holland Park Mansions. Holland Park House is next door but one, miss. I'll show you, if you like."

"Thank you," I had begun, and was already moving farther from the door, when from within a man came out in so great a hurry that the janitor was obliged to forget his dignity and give a funny little hop out of the way.

I, too, stepped aside, expecting to see the man continue his headlong career down the drive to the gate; but instead he stopped abruptly on the threshold and gazed at me.

He was a man of middle age, well dressed and substantial-looking, with old-fashioned side whiskers, gray hair, and round, gold-bowed, smoked spectacles that

lent him a benevolent air. In his hand was a telegraph form, crushed up with the opened envelope.

"I beg your pardon," he said; then paused, as if undecided how to follow up his preface. I gleaned a rapid impression that he fancied we had met before, and though his face was strange to me, oddly enough I vaguely had the same feeling in regard to him.

The pause was very short; he had scarcely given himself more than time to draw breath, although it certainly had seemed that, for the fraction of a second, he had sought eagerly for an idea, an inspiration.

Then—"I beg your pardon," he said again. "But didn't I hear you inquiring for Holland Park House? The people there are your friends?"

"I don't know Mrs. Leatherby-Smith," I confessed humbly. "But her companion, Miss Anne Bryden, is a friend of mine."

The face of the middle-aged man brightened with a smile. I racked my brain to think where, if ever, I had seen him before; but the recollection would not come.

"Ah, Miss Anne Bryden! She is a friend of mine also. It is a great pity, if you were gong to Holland Park House to-night, that Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and Miss Bryden are both away. They are not expected to return until to-morrow morning. I am Mr. Wynn-stay. You may have heard Miss Bryden speak of me."

"No," I replied, my heart sinking at the news of Anne's absence. "I don't think she has mentioned you. But, then, I haven't seen much of her since she and Mrs. Leatherby-Smith came to live in Addison

Road. It is very odd, however, that Anne said nothing to me when I was with her this afternoon about going away for all night."

"I dare say she did not know then," Mr. Wynnstay explained, regarding my changed countenance intently. "Mrs. Leatherby-Smith is a woman of quick decisions. They—er—left quite suddenly, as I happen to know. I'm sorry my little friend Miss Bryden forgot to mention my existence, for, had she done so, you would be more ready to let me help you in any way possible, if you are inconvenienced by her unexpected absence. I trust, however, that—er—you are *not* inconvenienced?"

If I had been quite myself I might successfully have maintained an air of graceful reserve; but I was weak with fatigue and hunger, which had developed into a wiry headache, with little hot and cold flashes of giddiness. My eyes were so full of tears that a fall of my lashes sent two plashing over my cheeks, and after that it was useless to pretend that I was indifferent.

"I don't quite know what to do," I choked, "for I thought Anne would surely have been at home. However, it doesn't matter at all. I am much obliged to you, sir, for saving me the trouble of going on to Holland Park House. Good-night."

"But, my dear young lady, you must really forgive me: I can't let you go away like that. Pray wait, and let us have a moment's conversation. Denby"—to the janitor—"place a chair for the lady. She is tired."

These last sentences were delivered with authority,

and obeyed with alacrity. Evidently Mr. Wynnstay was a respected tenant of Holland Park Mansions.

I sat down, not because my mind desired it, but because my knees insisted.

"You were very anxious, I fear, to see Miss Bryden?" said the gentleman with side whiskers.

"I meant to stop to-night with her," I admitted, "as—I happened to be rather far from home, and it is late. But——"

"Of course? Quite so. And now you are somewhat at a loss. As a friend of Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's and Miss Bryden's, you must permit me to advise you."

"Where have I seen you before?" I demanded abruptly—or, rather, something within me, over which I had no control, seemed to ask the question.

Mr. Wynnstay's face stiffened.

"If we had met before, it is impossible that I should have forgotten it," he said politely. But, despite the politeness, for some reason which I could not understand, my words had displeased and disconcerted him.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT I SAW IN THE MIRROR

I FELT that I must be growing morbid, looking for mysteries and hidden meanings everywhere, even in the most unlikely places, as I had appeared continually to do during the past few eventful hours. Perhaps I had imagined Mr. Wynnstay's displeasure; at any rate, it apparently lasted but for an instant.

"It would certainly not be agreeable for you to go to Holland Park House in both ladies' absence, as you are not acquainted with Mrs. Leatherby-Smith," he went on, revealing his consideration for my forlornness, "and simply announce to the servants that you intended to stop the night. Unless they already know you very well, I fear they would hesitate to let you in."

"I shouldn't dream of attempting such a thing," I returned. "You have been good to take an interest; but now I really must go, and——"

"Pray wait. I believe I see a way out of the difficulty," Mr. Wynnstay interpolated. "If you will come into my study, which is close by on this floor, and sit for a few minutes while I give you a letter to the housekeeper, telling her (on my responsibility) to take you up to Miss Bryden's room, she will with-

out doubt do so. Then Mrs. Leatherby-Smith need know nothing of the transaction until you see Miss Bryden and she explains matters satisfactorily to her employer. What do you say to that plan?"

I hardly knew what to say. The man was a stranger to me; it was distasteful to accept a favour from him; the whole affair was distressing; and I could scarcely bring myself to pass a night under Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's roof without her permission. But the alternative was appalling. I was penniless; it was now nearer eleven than ten; the night loomed black and full of horrors to my sensitized imagination.

"I think I must accept your kindness," I said. "Perhaps—would it not be better if you would take me to the door of Holland Park House, instead of troubling to write a letter? I fancy you were going out when I——"

"It will be better to write," he reiterated; and going to the door through which I had seen him come out into the hall, he threw it open.

There was darkness within at first, but in a second or two Mr. Wynnstay's hand had found the electric button, and the room was illumined by a clear and brilliant light.

"We shall not be long, Denby," announced my benefactor, as if to set me at my ease with the janitor, who had been decorously drinking in our conversation. "You may be at hand, if you please, to show the lady out when she is ready to go."

These words relieved me from danger of being placed in a false position, and my gratitude towards

Mr. Wynnstay increased. He was certainly remarkably thoughtful, and I reproached myself for a dim feeling of physical repulsion against him which had sprung up in my breast with the first glimpse of his benevolent, middle-aged countenance.

"Perhaps the man of whom he reminds me was connected with some disagreeable experience or other which I can't remember, but which I'm now visiting on this innocent and kindly old person," I said to myself as I walked, still with a certain reluctance, into Mr. Wynnstay's domain.

It was a handsomely-furnished room, though almost any other appellation than "study" would have been more appropriate to a place where books were so few. However, there were one or two shelves where luxuriously-bound volumes turned their handsome leather backs to the audience; on a table magazines and papers were scattered; and there was a desk with a silk-shaded lamp, for which Mr. Wynnstay switched on the electric light.

He did not entirely close the door leading into the hall, so that I still felt easily able to establish communication with the outer world, inhabited by Denby.

"I had the misfortune a few weeks ago to dislocate the thumb of my right hand," my host remarked, when he had laid out writing materials. "It is difficult for me, even now, to use a pen, and I shall be obliged if you will write the letter I mentioned, which I will sign when it is finished. Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's housekeeper will recognise my signature, which she has had occasion to see on one or two legal docu-

ments. All you need say is that Miss—er—I don't think, now I come to reflect, that I have the pleasure of knowing your name."

I mentioned it; and he went on to suggest the outlines of such a note to the housekeeper as he thought best calculated to open Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's doors for me. Meanwhile, I had sat obediently down at the desk, and taken up a pen.

It appeared to me that if he had accompanied me to Holland Park House, saying a few words of introduction to the servant at the door, who must have been familiar with his face, it would have been a distinct saving of time; but he had chosen otherwise, and it was not for me to question his decision.

As I wrote the letter, which, following on the lines proposed by Mr. Wynnstay, had to be somewhat long and rambling, my host walked up and down the room. I could hear his nervous footfalls on the polished floor, whenever he strayed off the big Turkish rug in the centre; but once, for a long moment, the sound of his steps was stilled.

Silence, save for the scratching of the quill pen in my fingers across the paper, reigned in the room. I wrote quickly on, and had nearly reached the end of what I had to say, when I heard a faint, clinking noise, like two pieces of glass brought into contact with each other.

"Mr. Wynnstay is surreptitiously refreshing himself with a glass of wine, or whisky, behind my back," I thought; "or perhaps he is pouring out something for me, but I certainly won't have it. If he offered me a

biscuit instead, in my present state of collapse, I might not be able to resist, but wine could not tempt me."

Writing the last few words, I became suddenly conscious that Mr. Wynnstay had come close behind my chair. I had not heard his advance; the rug had deadened the sound of his footsteps, but somehow I felt that he was there. He was looking at the letter under my hand, maybe; and the thought that his gaze was fastened on the back of my head made me uncomfortable.

I did not turn to look at him, but I raised my eyes from the paper, and as I did so they focussed upon a quaint convex mirror hanging on the wall directly over the desk.

Reflected on its oddly transforming surface, I could see myself, and, bending over me, Mr. Wynnstay. He was looking, not at me, nor at the letter, as I had fancied, but at something which he held in his hand; and a prickling thrill ran through my nerves at the notable difference in the man—a difference for which the convex mirror was not wholly responsible.

He was no longer benevolent of aspect. His big mouth hung half open, showing yellow, irregular teeth. The round, smoked spectacles were pushed far up on his frowning forehead, and the eyes looked cruel. With a leap of the heart, I knew, in one terrible instant, where I had seen this man before.

The room faded, and I saw with my mind's eyes another picture which blotted all else out. A little girl was in a railway carriage with her mother, a beautiful, weary-faced woman in the heavy mourning which she had worn ever since the child could remember.

They had been whispering together of a wonderful change that was to come into their monotonous life, all through a letter which had arrived that morning, a change the mother could not explain then, but that the little girl would understand by-and-by, when it came, when everything was different, and they were happier than they had ever been.

The two spoke in low voices, but an old clergyman (with beautiful white hair and a long white beard) who got in at a station after theirs seemed interested in the couple. When they relapsed into thoughtful silence, he kindly offered the mother a share of his papers and magazines. Later, when she complained of a headache, he took from his bag a bottle of smelling salts, begging her to keep it as long as she liked.

She went to sleep with it in her hand at last; and, rather than wake her, the child gently withdrew the bottle from the clasping fingers when the old clergyman was about to leave the train, returning it to him with a grateful smile.

He had bent down to take it, and as he did so the little girl looked up into his eyes. They were curious eyes, one brown, the other grayish-blue, with a mottled yellow line round the pupil. For years the child had not thought of those strange eyes, because, a few moments after the clergyman had left the compartment, a thing had happened which made all the past seem dim and far away.

At the next station the slender figure in black had fallen sideways, with a slight jerking of the train as it stopped. The little girl, frightened, had attempted

to rouse her mother in vain. The sleep into which she had sunk had been that dread sleep which knows no waking.

"Heart failure," the doctors had said; but that was afterwards. The picture which had risen to blur the features of the handsome, commonplace room in Addison Road held only the sleeping mother, the grateful child, the white-haired clergyman with the curious eyes.

I had been that child. And those eyes were reflected now in the mirror over the desk.

CHAPTER VII

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF MR. WYNNSTAY

THE old clergyman who had travelled in the same compartment with my mother and me, on that saddest day of my life, had not been in any sinister way connected with the tragedy—which, indeed, only occurred after he had departed. He had been attentive and kind to us; he had looked keenly at me as he went out; these were his sole sins. Yet it was horrible to see the ill-matched eyes again, after all these years, set in a younger face—a face differing in every other feature, framed no longer in an aureole of snowy hair.

How was I so sure they were the same eyes? I could not have explained that; I could not have told my impression coherently enough to prove anything to the most lenient jury; yet I was sure. And being sure, I was filled with the greater fear at what I saw.

My glance into the mirror showed me Mr. Wynnstay standing close behind my chair, pouring the contents of a bottle upon a handkerchief. He was stooping over, as if to bring himself even nearer to me. As I looked, my gaze fixed upon the glass with a hateful fascination, the bottle was emptied; I began to inhale a pungent, sickly odour, which was not entirely unfamiliar. Cousin Sarah East used stuff that smelled

like this sometimes when she had headaches. It was chloroform.

Instantly I knew what was coming, though why it should come I could not guess. There was no time for speculation—no time for thought at all. With a low cry, I half rose in my chair. The man's stout body, pressing against it now from behind, prevented my pushing it back. The slight sound I had uttered caused him to start and lift his head from his task. Our eyes met in the mirror.

For my life I could not have withdrawn mine. I saw him in the glass, as he pounced upon me like some great bird of prey. Then the picture went out, like the rainbow tints in a bubble that bursts, for my face was buried in the dripping handkerchief.

For some short space—how many seconds it might have measured I cannot tell—I struggled, voicelessly, striving to escape, striving to breathe, knowing through it all that if I could only scream, the janitor must surely hear me and come. I knew this; but I knew also that with every breath I tried to draw I merely inhaled the heavy fumes of chloroform, which were gradually steeping my senses in sleep.

I felt them going—going—felt consciousness slipping from me, on a sluggish tide. I began to see, in a dream, white pond lilies floating along the smooth, moving surface of water, bound in the end to fall over a weir, towards which they were almost imperceptibly drifting. Those lilies and my own failing senses were somehow the same; if I could arrest one, I could save both, and I fought for the life of my own soul.

"I mustn't let myself go—I mustn't."

I could hear the admonition buzzing queerly in my mind, like a wheel spinning round and round. Once lost to consciousness, I dimly felt that this world was finished for me—I had come to the end; the lilies would go over the weir and be beaten to shreds in the foaming rush of the water.

Then another voice came; very small, very far away it seemed in my strange state, but growing louder, until it shouted thunderously in my brain:

"Don't breathe; hold your breath till he takes away the handkerchief. Pretend to be unconscious."

I had just presence of mind enough left to obey the promptings of this instinct towards self-preservation. I thought that the man would never remove the wet linen pressed over my face; but when I had let my body collapse limply until it fell back into his arms, the handkerchief was withdrawn.

A second longer and I must have gasped wildly for air, filling my lungs with more of the fumes, enough to send the poor, floating lilies, which I still dreamily saw, over the crystal lip of the weir.

My eyes were closed; my head was lying back against the man's shoulder. I knew that he was gazing keenly at me, and I dared not let my eyelids quiver, lest he should suspect that I deceived him.

It would have been even harder than it was to lie motionless, feigning complete unconsciousness, had it not been that the chloroform had already half done its work.

I retained a knowledge of what passed, but hazily,

and my mind was clogged, clouded with a heavy indifference to my fate. I was like one who, though dreaming still, is sufficiently awake to know that he dreams —no more.

"What luck! what astounding luck!" the man who had called himself Wynnstay whispered under his breath, a note of triumph thrilling through the subdued voice. "That it should have been to-night of all nights—after the telegram. Like a lamb—that pokes its nose into the butcher's hand."

The muttered words struck on my brain as if they had been blows from a tiny hammer, each one unerringly aimed to reach the tenderest spot. My ebbing senses came back with a shock, a wrenching of the nerves; still, my body and my spirit felt as if they were separated, and I were trying vainly to fit them together again, so that I could move. As it was, I did not seem to have any control over my own muscles.

"What shall I do—how save myself from him?" I thought. "In a moment it may be too late to decide. Am I to lie quietly here, or am I to stake all on a single move—now—in this instant?"

Yet I could do nothing. My body refused obedience to the brain.

The man gathered me up in his arms and moved across the room. A minute more and my dress was drenched with eau de Cologne. I wondered mistily if it were meant to drown the odour of the chloroform. At all events, it was not dashed into my face, and evidently was not used with the intention of reviving me.

Once more Mr. Wynnstay moved with me in his arms. To my surprise and almost incredulous joy, he was going toward the door that led into the hall.

I heard him call in a fussy, anxious tone:

"Denby! Denby! come here, quick!"

The door squeaked faintly, and the janitor's startled accents responded:

"Well, sir? Why, whatever's the matter, sir?"

"Good gracious! can't you see for yourself the girl's fainted?—fell over in her chair before she could finish a letter I was dictating to her. She must have been ill when she came—most inconsiderate, I must say. Call a four-wheeler, Denby, as quick as you can. I shall take her to my doctor's house. I can't stand a fainting woman on my hands."

"Pshaw, sir! she'll soon come round again," soothed the janitor.

"I won't trust to that. I'm not the man for this sort of thing. The cab, and make haste about it, Denby. I'll follow you out of doors with her, where it's dark. Not very pleasant for me if anybody should be coming in and catch me with a fainting woman in my arms. A nice situation!"

"All right, sir, if you're bound to have her out of the house," the janitor acquiesced, with a humorous quaver of indulgence in his voice. "I'll have whistled you a four-wheeler inside a couple of minutes, I dare say, though it's a bad time for cabs in this neighbourhood, I'm afraid."

Mr. Wynnstay was carrying me out of the house. A cool air blew on my face, and a flurry of rain that

had begun to fall from long-threatening skies spattered my forehead.

"Confound it!" the man muttered, and, with what secretiveness I could imagine, once more pressed over my mouth and nose the chlorformed handkerchief, which he must have hidden in his pocket.

He was afraid of the very thing which had occurred, and behind Denby's back was endeavouring to counteract the restorative effect of wind and rain.

I had been summoning all my strength, all my energies, for an effort to break my invisible bonds; and now I was to be defeated in the moment of success. If I could only hold my breath, and not draw in those deadly fumes——

There was the whistle for the cab which was to take me away—where? To my death, perhaps. I believed now that I must be in the hands of a madman, for he could have no sane motive in wishing to compass the destruction of so insignificant a creature as I. A madman would stop at nothing. It was now or never with me.

Again and again the whistle, and then came the rattle of wheels. A cab had driven hrough the gates, and the horse's feet were crunching the gravel of the short drive that led up to the house.

The man who held me started forward, the handkerchief no longer covering my face; then I heard him draw in his breath sharply, stepping back so hastily that he stumbled.

Involuntarily, in the instinctive effort to save himself from a fall, his grasp was loosened. I felt myself

slipping out of his arms, and with one supreme effort, staggering, panting, quivering, I threw him off, keeping my feet as they touched the ground.

"Help! help!" I whispered feebly, when I would have shrieked aloud.

My eyes were wide open now, and staring, though everything swam before them, as if I had been made giddy with the long-continued motion of a merry-go-round. What I saw, what I heard, mingled together in clamouring confusion—a pair of bright lights, like great eyes, a hansom, and two men getting out of it.

The yellow light shone on the face of one. I remembered it, and was vaguely glad. But, strangely, being glad caused me to weep, and through my weeping I could still hear down by the gate the shrill whistling that was to summon a four-wheeled cab.

"Save me!" I articulated hoarsely; and tottering forward, I kept myself from falling by seizing with both hands a black coat-sleeve which seemed to stretch itself protectingly toward me.

"Don't be frightened. Of course I'll help you," a voice said soothingly. "Has this man been annoying you?"

I pressed closer to him, farther from Mr. Wynnstay, whom with clearing vision I could distinctly see, his whiskered face more benevolent of aspect than ever now that the smoked glasses once more hid the queer disparity of his eyes.

"He—he was going to kill me, I think," I panted.

Somehow, looking at that mild countenance, my

words sounded unconvincing, foolish. I realized this, and was abashed.

Mr. Wynnstay laughed good-naturedly.

"There!" he exclaimed, "that's what an old bachelor gets for meddling with what doesn't concern him. It's just what I was afraid of." He lifted his voice, and called to the janitor. "Never mind the cab, Denby. The lady has come to herself."

"Whatever this man says, don't believe him," I pleaded. "For Heaven's sake don't let him take me away with him!"

"Certainly not," he whose arm supported me returned with decision. "But——"

"Certainly not, indeed!" broke in Mr. Wynnstay irritably. "It is the last thing I want, I can tell you, young lady, now that you seem to need a doctor as little as I do. I really must ask you to let me explain this most vexing dilemma, sir. You are Sir George Seaforth, I believe? I've seen you here before, as well as elsewhere. You will probably recognise my name also when I mention it—Nathaniel Wynnstay, not quite unknown as a solicitor."

"I think I have friends who know you," replied the other, somewhat impatiently I thought. "Still——"

Again the elder man interrupted:

"I feel bound to introduce myself, under the unpleasant aspersions which this lady has been misguided enough to—but a few words will make everything plain. I bear her no malice; she is only mistaken. Until half an hour ago we were strangers. She came here believing this to be Holland Park House, I was

in the act of going out when I heard her inquiring for an acquaintance of mine living almost next door. Seeing that she was bitterly disappointed when I was able to inform her that the lady was away, and fancying her tired and ill, I determined to arrange that she should, after all, spend the night at my friend Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's house.

"My right hand being lame, I suggested that she should write a proposed letter to the housekeeper for my signature. She consented, but hardly had she sat down at the desk in my study when I saw that she was on the point of fainting. I hurried into the adjoining room for some eau de Cologne, which I sprinkled over her, unfortunately without avail. I then called the janitor, and requested him to procure a four-wheeled cab, intending to drive the lady to my physican's, not far off, as I had never seen a woman faint before, and dared not take the responsibility of restoring her. Fearing to be seen in a ridiculous position by some of the other tenants of this house, I hastily carried the lady, apparently still unconscious, out of doors into the shadow of the porch, to wait until the cab should arrive.

"The rest you know, and though I fail to comprehend why the young lady I tried to benefit should accuse me—er—as a would-be murderer, I suppose hysterical women are not responsible for their hallucinations."

"He drugged me!" I stammered weakly, in self-defence, astounded at the plausible manner in which he had turned the story. His version sounded so probable

—mine so wildly impossible. "He pressed a handkerchief wet with chloroform over my face. I kept myself from breathing the fumes as well as I could, but I was dazed. Even now everything seems far away and strange."

"You dreamed it all," asserted Mr. Wynnstay. "Quite natural. I have no hard feelings toward you —though it is a little discouraging when a man tries to do a kind action to be rewarded by such accusations. What motive could a staid old fellow like me have had, my dear madam, for attempting to drug you?"

"I—don't know," I faltered.

"Ah, I thought so. You will presently, I am sure, admit that you have done me a further injustice. Denby, you heard and saw everything that took place between this young lady and me. Perhaps you will kindly add your testimony to mine."

"Certingly, sir," promptly responded the janitor, pleased to be called upon as a witness. "It's all true what Mr. Wynnstay says. He was most kind to the young lady, whom he'd evidently never set eyes on before to-night. When she went into his study for the letter to be written the door was open, and Mr. Wynnstay purticulurly ast me to stop in the hall a few minutes till she should want to be shown out. I did stop, and I could easy 'ave seen everything that went on in the study. It wasn't much above five minutes, I should think, before Mr. Wynnstay (one of our oldest tenants, I may say) called out to me that the lady'd fainted. I was scared, though not, when

I came to think of it, surprised, for she was as white as a ghost, and shaky-like, when I opened the front-door for her; and I thought she'd 'ave dropped when I told her Mrs. Leatherby-Smith didn't live here. Mr. Wynnstay followed me out, and I'd just begun to whistle the four-wheeler when your hansom drove in."

"I've often heard my friends in the flat next mine speak of Mr. Wynnstay," remarked a new voice, which I had not heard before.

It was that of the other man, who had come in the cab with Sir George Seaforth. Sir George Seaforth! "What association did that name call up?" I asked myself. I could not remember; my head ached blindingly, and I felt too ill for further mental effort. But I knew that this was the man who, near Lady Sophie de Gretton's house, had pulled me out from among the horses and set me safely on the pavement again. To-day seemed full of coincidences; but I was to learn later that this meeting was not a coincidence. Rather, it was a direct result of an earlier incident.

The other man, who had testified last to the immaculate Mr. Wynnstay's integrity, I had never seen before. I felt no curiosity regarding him—only a slight sense of resentment that he should defend my enemy seemingly at my expense.

Sir George Seaforth looked at me, and I met his eyes appealingly, fearful lest Mr. Wynnstay and his backers had alienated him from my cause. But there was no stern incredulity visible on the brown face, though I searched the semi-darkness to find it. The hansom had driven away now, the cabman paid (I

indistinctly remembered seeing) by Sir George Seaforth's companion.

The two new-comers, Mr. Wynnstay, the janitor, and I, were the only actors in the scene—the only audience as well—our footlights the bright stream of electricity which poured through the open doors into the night.

"You oughtn't to be standing out here in the rain," said Sir George Seaforth to me, without answering his friend.

Curiously, even in that moment, there was room in my mind for triumph that his first thought, after all he had heard, was still of my welfare.

"You look awfully ill. What would you like to do? Will you go at once to your friends' house?"

"I can't go now," I answered. "They're away, and——"

"But you can still have the introduction to the housekeeper I promised," benevolently interrupted Mr. Wynnstay. "As I said, I bear you no malice, poor child, for the illusion of a temporarily disordered brain. I'm certain that, by this time, you are ready to see common-sense and laugh at your former suspicions. Come now! to prove you regret your injustice, better let me escort you to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's. We won't trouble any further about the letter; and Holland Park House is only a few steps from here."

"No—no!" I ejaculated.

"What? You don't mean to say that you still believe me a—er—a villain out of melodrama?" Mr. Wynnstay laughed jovially.

He was either a marvellous actor or else—or else he was right, and hunger, fatigue, and excitement had combined to make me dream things unspeakable. Was it, after all, possible that I had been on the point of fainting, without the subtle aid of drugs, and in the clouded moment of swooning imagined the picture in the looking-glass?

CHAPTER VIII

THE MEETING THAT WAS NOT A COINCIDENCE

How could I prove my story? I had been tired, I had been almost ready to faint. Sheer hunger had made my head feel as if it were filled with the fumes of new wine. It had been so before I looked up into the mirror to see Mr. Wynnstay pouring something out of a bottle on to a handkerchief.

How could I be sure, and make others sure, that it had been chloroform? Maybe I had lost consciousness at once, and, as Mr. Wynnstay said, dreamed all the rest. I saw, or thought I saw, that Sir George Seaforth and his friend both thought that it was so.

I no longer found any resemblance between this prosaic, gray-whiskered, middle-aged man and the picturesque old clergyman with the white hair and the eyes that did not match. Even if such a resemblance did exist—even if by an astonishing coincidence the two were one and the same—how could I possibly prove it now? Besides, the clergyman had done us no harm. He had come and gone on that sorrowful day, and been connected with its grief only through the chance that he had been travelling for a short distance in our company.

I realized that the ground was cut away from under

my feet. To-morrow (if I had eaten and slept meanwhile) I might once again feel as certain of what I had seen in the mirror as I had felt at the time; but now I could plan nothing, do nothing. If my eyes had seen aright, then Mr. Wynnstay was too clever for me to cope with. If they had been deceived, it would be shameful to reiterate my accusations. I was very unhappy, utterly bewildered.

"I don't know what to say," I exclaimed at last. "Only—I would rather go alone to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's. I—if I have misjudged you, I hope you will forgive me. But—but I can't forget what I thought. I can't trust myself with you alone, feeling as I do."

The man shrugged his elderly shoulders. Sir George Seaforth had led me up on the porch out of the rain, which was increasing, and it gave me a sense of protection to be near him. I feared at first lest he should fail me, and deliver me over to the enemy; but I was sure he would not do that now.

"Far be it from me to inflict myself upon you, if you can do without me, madam," returned Mr. Wynnstay. "You intimated that you had nowhere else to go; yet you seemed to think your reception by servants you did not know in Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's house was more than doubtful. If you have other resources, and much the better."

"I have no others—for the present," I stammered. "But——"

"In a way this lady and I are old acquaintances," broke in Sir George Seaforth impulsively, after a quick glance at my distressed face. "I had the privilege of

doing her a very small service only this afternoon, so that perhaps she will allow me to make a suggestion. Mr. Wynnstay seems to have said that a Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, living in this street, was away. If that statement proves true, it is so much in his favour; therefore it is only fair that he should be granted a chance of vindicating himself. Suppose, then, that we all three go with her to the door of this other house?"

He had addressed no one in particular, but had spoken to all. My eyes were on Mr. Wynnstay's face, and I thought that he looked disconcerted, a dull red flush slowly mounting to his forehead. But if it were so he soon ceased to show traces of his disturbance.

"Thank you," I said quickly. "I should be glad if you would go."

I did not stop to reflect that it might look strange to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's servants for a young woman to arrive at eleven o'clock at night with a bodyguard of three men. I only remembered that I had to go somewhere, and soon; that, above all, I would go nowhere alone with Mr. Wynnstay.

"It's settled, then," Sir George Seaforth took me up. "I've an umbrella, and if you will allow me, I'll shield you from the rain. Mr. Wynnstay, you and my friend Benoit seem to be old neighbours, so perhaps you'll show us the way."

My thoughts were very busy as we walked from Holland Park Mansions to Holland Park House, and I wondered greatly what might be in Mr. Wynnstay's mind now that the management of affairs had been taken thus summarily out of his hands. It seemed to

me that Sir George Seaforth had acted with diplomacy, putting the other in a position to appear discredited if he betrayed reluctance.

I liked Sir George Seaforth, and I was more thankful than I could have expressed for his timely intervention.

Just how much he had really saved me from I did not know, but at least he had relieved my mind of an agonizing burden of fear, and for the second time in the day I was grateful to him.

Now that my brain was less oppressed by the weight of bewilderment and dread, I remembered well enough where and when I had heard his name before. Indeed, it seemed strange that I had not instantly recollected.

The footman at Lady Sophie de Gretton's had announced Sir George Seaforth, and gratified his mistress by showing her visitor into the boudoir instead of bringing him into the drawing-room, where Anne and I had been sitting. Sir George could have made but a short call, for not ten minutes after we had left the house he had arrived in Hamilton Place, and had extricated me from my difficulty in the street.

As I looked back, the chain of events which connected us appeared to be linked together in a curious and complicated manner.

"It must seem very strange to you that I should be here," I said lamely, as we followed Mr. Wynnstay's bulky shoulders towards Holland Park House.

"Strange?" he echoed. "Not at all. Your friend gave this address in the cab to-day. I thought you lived here. That's the reason——"

He stopped abruptly.

"The reason for what?" I questioned.

"If I finished that sentence you would be vexed. I don't want to vex you."

"But I wouldn't be, I promise. You have been so kind."

"Well, then, I was going to say that I should not have been with Benoit this evening if your friend hadn't mentioned Holland Park House."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, well, to tell the truth, I dined at a club where I thought I should be pretty sure to meet Benoit, and then I hinted for an invitation to come home with him. He's sometimes asked me before, and—er—I've usually been engaged. But I was in hopes he knew you and your friend, you see, living so near and all that, and I thought he might tell me something about you."

Evidently Lady Sophie de Gretton had kept her own counsel. Perhaps I ought to have been vexed, but I was not. I was glad that Sir George Seaforth had taken so much trouble to learn something more about the owner of a tolerably prepossessing face seen in a crowd.

My heart beat faster at the idea of meeting him again some day when I should be visiting in Park Lane. I was even tempted to speak of the prospect, but I refrained. If he had not forgotten by that time —and the time should actually come—it would be pleasant to watch the effect of a surprise.

"Are you angry?" he was asking.

"No—o. I don't think so. After all you've done

for me in a day, it would be too ungracious to be angry. You can hardly understand how thankful I was to you for—for coming just when you did to-night."

"I only wish I could have known and come sooner. But I really think—if you don't mind my saying so—you were mistaken about that old chap. He has the reputation of being a very respectable sort of person. It sounds such a mad trick, doesn't it, for an elderly solicitor to chloroform and attempt to kidnap a young lady without any apparent object except the fun of the thing? Still, I wouldn't for the world he should have gone a step with you alone."

"I am beginning to believe I may have deceived myself, and to feel very foolish," I confessed. "I was so sick—so dazed—I might have imagined things. But I am much better now."

We had reached a gate, and Mr. Wynnstay, with his companion, Mr. Benoit, was going in. We followed up a path, and were close behind them when Mr. Wynnstay rang the house bell.

Sir George Seaforth had only had time to ask me a question, which I had not yet answered, when a footman appeared at the door—a footman in a far more showy livery than Lady Sophie de Gretton's.

"Mrs. Leatherby-Smith is away, I believe?" Mr. Wynnstay announced rather than inquired.

"Yes, sir."

The eyes behind the smoked spectacles glanced back at me. The man's whole aspect said: "So, you see, I did not deceive you."

"And Miss Bryden—she also is absent, is she not?"

"Yes, sir. She is with Mrs. Leatherby-Smith."

"I thought so. It is unfortunate, for here is a lady, a friend of Miss Bryden's, who through an accident finds it very desirable that she should stay here all night. You had better show her in to the housekeeper, and ask that she be taken up to Miss Bryden's room."

The footman looked very blank.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but Mrs. Purkis, the housekeeper, had permission to go out of town for the night. It is as much as my place is worth to admit a stranger when Mrs. Leatherby-Smith isn't at home."

"What! A friend of Miss Bryden's?"

"I'm afraid that wouldn't matter at all, sir."

"Well, then—er—a friend of mine?"

"Even then, sir. You see, Mrs. Leatherby-Smith is a peculiar lady. She's more easily displeased than pleased, sir, and——"

"What's all this fuss about?" sharply inquired a woman's voice, and an odd apparition made its appearance in the dimly-lighted hall.

It was an old lady, in a bonnet which possessed a personality as distinct as the wearer's. Over the grizzled curls that hung on either side a long, narrow face, the bonnet seemed to nod at us with an intelligence of its own, mingled of many features—feathers, flowers, and satin bows.

"Who's a friend of Miss Bryden's, who wants to stay here all night?" the new arrival demanded.

The footman stepped aside, his lips twitching, and with a gesture indicated me.

"A very pretty girl," remarked the old lady, with unembarrassed frankness. "And who may you be, my dear?"

"Consuelo Brand," I responded.

If Sir George Seaforth had been ignorant of my name, he would know it now.

"I am Miss Smith," vouchsafed the apparition in return. "Plain Jane Smith; there's no Leatherby about me, though I am the sister of Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's late husband. I have arrived unexpectedly to-night, as my sister-in-law has yet to find out. I was having my supper there, in the dining-room, when I heard all this disputation. If you're a friend of Miss Bryden's you shall stop here. I like Miss Bryden. She's not as pretty as you are, but I dare say she's a good bit cleverer. You needn't look so sour, John, or James, or whatever your name is. Mrs. Leatherby-Smith is always willing to please me, as you'll see for yourself before I've been long in the house. Come in, Miss Brand. I suppose these gentlemen don't wish to stay here, too?"

"Now that Miss Brand is safely settled, we will bid her good-night," said Sir George Seaforth.

The old lady stared at him, screwing up her eyes until her wrinkled face looked whimsically shrewd.

"Are you her brother?" she inquired.

"Only a friend," explained Sir George.

"Humph! Well, good-night to you, gentlemen. You need have no anxiety on your young friend's account. She is quite safe with me."

Sir George Seaforth held out his hand. I took it,

and felt mine warmly grasped. I thought he wished the pressure to tell me that he was really my friend. A moment more, and the door had shut the three men out of my sight.

"Come into the dining-room with me," said plain Miss Jane Smith. "I haven't finished my supper yet, and I'm as hungry as a hunter. My sister-in-law won't be home till nearly twelve, I dare say."

"Is Mrs. Leatherby-Smith coming home to-night then?" I inquired eagerly. "I thought—I was told she was to be away till to-morrow."

Miss Smith looked at the footman.

"She has gone to the theatre," he vouchsafed. "Miss Bryden went with her, as a lady she had asked sent word she was ill at the last moment. We are expecting them home in about half an hour."

After all, then, Mr. Wynnstay had been wrong. Either he had deliberately deceived me, for the purpose which he had tried to carry out and failed, or else he had misunderstood information really received from Mrs. Leatherby-Smith. I was sure, whichever it might be, that he was clever enough, if confronted with the discrepancy, to make it appear quite natural that he had been mistaken.

I only wished, in any case, that I had heard this piece of news before his departure; for all that the footman had said in his presence corroborated his statements to me.

By this time we had entered the dining-room, and I glanced wistfully at the tray appetizingly set forth on the big table. Perhaps Miss Smith caught the

hungry gleam in my eye, for she suggested without delay that I should share her meal.

The footman (who ventured to inform his mistress's eccentric sister-in-law that he was called "Thomas") waited upon us, bestowing scanty attention on me, however, and showing, as only a servant can, that but for Miss Smith I would have been a person beneath his august consideration.

Revived by cold chicken and salad, I answered the spinster's numerous questions, and only had time to revert to my fear of Mrs. Leatherby-Smith when her arrival was imminent.

"I do hope she won't mind very much. I hope she won't think it horrid of me to come in and impose upon her, and perhaps be vexed with poor Anne on my account."

"My dear Miss Brand, I am in the house," Miss Smith dryly reminded me. "You have to learn that, though my dear sister-in-law Caroline would be ashamed to have me inside her doors, with the chance that some of her grand friends might see me and consider me a guy, if I were a poor woman; as it is she puts up with me and my clothes and my crankiness because she expects that one day I'll leave her a fortune. Whether I shall do that or not remains to be seen; in fact, it depends very largely on herself, as she well knows. She will be intensely annoyed when she finds that I have arrived, and she will wish me in Jericho, or, still better, in my grave (provided the will were all right), but she will pretend to be delighted at the surprise. And when I say I insisted

on your coming in, that I might be amused and saved from dozing off in her absence, she will outwardly smile on you, though within she will be abusing us both, and may even resort to profanity. I suppose, as long as she is civil, you don't mind what she thinks?"

"Not so very much," I replied doubtfully, starting as I spoke at the imperious ringing of the door bell, which caused Thomas almost to fall over his own smartly-shod feet in his anxiety to answer it.

"What! Miss Smith in the dining-room, and another lady?" exclaimed a sharp voice in the hall. Then, with an accompaniment of rustling silk and satin, a figure blazing with jewels swept in the room.

The old lady, who did not deign to rise for the greeting, was overwhelmed with embraces. I had jumped up guiltily, feeling much like a detected thief, and gazed anxiously about for Anne; but she had not followed her employer into the room. I dared not speak, or go in search of her, but stood humbly waiting the cessation of endearments. Fully a minute must have passed before Mrs. Leatherby-Smith turned an acid smile on me.

She was big, and florid, and formidable, with a skin that looked as if it might be one size too small for her massive face and as much of her body as a low-cut gown generously displayed.

"How do you do?" she remarked, with an evident effort to be civil. "You are a friend of my dear sister Jane's, of course?"

"She's a friend of mine since half an hour ago, for, like most ugly old women, I like pretty faces and sweet

voices," explained the dear Jane. "But she came here to see your companion, that nice honest girl Anne Bryden, and I insisted that she should come in."

"Oh, indeed!"

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith froze visibly. Her light eyes snapped, but her voice still smoothly did honour to the rich relative.

"It is rather late for a visit to Miss Bryden; but, of course, if you think best——"

"That's what I told her," calmly interpolated Miss Smith.

"Thomas shall call Miss Bryden. She can come down for a few minutes, I suppose, though she has just gone up to her bedroom. You—er—live in the neighbourhood, Miss——Miss——"

"Brand," finished the spinster. "No, she's been telling me she lives in Peckham. She's had a little trouble at home, and I assured her that you would be quite pleased she should spend the night here with her friend."

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's soul writhed under that tight skin of hers.

My frightened eyes could almost see its convulsions.

"Really! I——" she began——"really, I don't see that I am called upon to entertain my secretary's friends whenever they have trouble at home and choose to make a convenience of my house. I am surprised at Miss Bryden. She and I are not on such terms that——"

"Hoity toity, don't blame Anne Bryden!" ejaculated the old lady, her quaint curls shaking like a peal of

bells. "If anybody's to be hauled over the coals, Caroline, haul me. Though I tell you frankly I'm not fond of being scolded, when I think I've acted for the best. Send the girl out into the street, by all means, if you grudge her half Anne Bryden's bed, and a bit of bacon in the morning; but if you do, as I'm responsible for her being here, I'll go with her. I dare say we can get accommodation at a hotel in the neighbourhood, if it is nearly twelve o'clock."

But Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was ready to atone with tears for offending her dear Jane; Jane had quite misunderstood her; she had been taken by surprise, that was all. Of course, the young person was welcome to stop, if she liked—one night, two nights—as many nights as Jane desired. Thomas should take Miss—er—Brand to Thérèse, the French maid, who would show her up to Miss Bryden's room at once.

Yes, that would be best. Then Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and dear Jane could have a little quiet chat, undisturbed.

Before I fairly realized what had happened, I had been swept out of the room with a tidal wave of footman, and was mounting the stairs. From an open door on the first floor issued, in answer to Thomas's call of "Ma'mselle," a neat Frenchwoman, who, with criticism in her eye, consented to conduct me further.

Anne's bedchamber could not have been higher up, unless it had been built like an excrescence on the roof. It was surrounded by servants' rooms, as I guessed from an adjacent sound of snoring, which could only have proceeded from the lungs of a professed cook.

Thérèse's tap at the door caused it to be thrown suddenly open, and there stood Anne, already half undressed.

"Good gracious—Consuelo Brand!" she ejaculated. "Is it you, or your ghost?"

"I'm not quite sure," I answered, rather tremulously, as she stepped aside to let me in, for I had gone through a great deal in the past seven or eight hours.

"Does Mrs. Leatherby-Smith know you're here?"

The whole history of Anne's relations with her employer were in the anxious tone of her voice, the worried look in her eye.

"Yes. She sent her maid up with me. Oh, Anne, I have so much—such extraordinary things to tell you."

"Sh!" she whispered. "Let me peep first and see if Thérèse is listening at the keyhole."

* * * * * *

I did not sleep much that night, and neither did Anne. After I had told her the story of my adventures since our parting, we did not talk a great deal; but there were certain of her comments on my story which made a deep impression on my mind. As for my experience with Mr. Wynnstay, her practical common-sense scorned my sensational imaginings. Of course, it was nonsense about his having been disguised as a clergyman all those years ago, or the clergyman being disguised at present as Mr. Wynnstay—if I liked to put it so.

Plenty of people had eyes that did not match in colour. Anne's mother had once had a German waiter

in the Bloomsbury boarding-house like that. Besides, she herself had seen a woman in the street not long ago with a blue eye and a brown eye. It was uncommon, but not so wonderfully rare as I seemed to think. No doubt all that business of the mirror had been a sort of nightmare while I was fainting. I had glanced up just as I was about to slip off into unconsciousness, seen Mr. Wynnstay coming with the eau de Cologne, as he had afterwards suggested, and then imagined everything else.

All this part of my tale, however, Anne seemed inclined to dismiss as of comparatively little importance. Oddly enough, it appeared to me, she was far more struck by my second meeting with Sir George Seaforth, and the fact that he should be Sir George Seaforth at all.

"It looks as if Fate had a hand in it," she said with a sigh—her face pale and weary in the bright moonlight that streamed through the uncurtained window, for we were talking in bed. "First we hear of him at that Lady Sophie de Gretton's"—Anne was fond of prefacing a name she did not fancy with a disdainful "that"—"then we meet him in the street, and he saves you from being run over, without our knowing who he is. Again, the same night, he comes to your rescue, when you fancy yourself in danger (not that I think you really were), and you find out that he is the very man Lady Sophie de Gretton wanted to keep you from meeting."

"We don't know that it was so at all," I retorted, defending the absent.

But Anne did not seem to hear. "I wonder why some women should have everything," she murmured, "and others—nothing?"

"What do you mean, dear?" I questioned.

She did not answer, and I could see her eyes staring into the moonlight, oblivious of me. It was these last words of Anne's which did as much as anything else to keep me waking that night.

CHAPTER IX

THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

In the morning she was more like herself, and only laughed when I proposed telegraphing to ask Lady Sophie de Gretton if I might go to her that day, instead of the next.

"I'll lend you the money gladly, Con," said Anne dryly—for without this favour I should not have been able to send a wire—"but I don't believe for a moment that Lady Sophie meant a word she said. I know a lot about her—things I've had to read aloud in the society papers since I've been with Mrs. Leatherby-Smith; and then the vulgar, pushing set that come here are always chattering about the aristocracy, pretending they've intimate friends among them whose secrets they're acquainted with. I've often heard Lady Sophie de Gretton's name, and though some of the things may have been gossip, others must have been true."

"What have you heard that makes you think she didn't mean me to take her invitation seriously?" I persisted, trying to look indifferent, though my heart was heavy and afraid.

I had burned my boats behind me when I left Peckham, and without Lady Sophie's hand to help me out

of the water, it seemed to my inexperience that I must surely drown.

"Well, you may have guessed that when she first spoke to us in the Park I didn't believe that she told the truth in announcing herself as Lady Sophie de Gretton. I thought the woman was an impostor, who had borrowed a well-known name to deceive us, for some horrid reason or other. But you would go home with her. I couldn't let you two march off alone, and when I saw the house and heard the servant calling her 'my lady,' I knew she couldn't have been lying. She was Lady Sophie de Gretton, and being Lady Sophie de Gretton, it seemed all the more sure that she wouldn't want to be bothered with a long visit from a poor girl like you."

"She—she explained," I put in shyly.

For to remember that flattering explanation made me appear conceited.

"Yes. No doubt she did admire you, and think she would like to see how you would look dressed up in smart clothes. Then she got talking on, till she'd committed herself rather farther than she intended, hoping you'd have sense enough to take it as a joke. But you didn't, and you saw at the last how she was in a furious hurry to get rid of us. I'll bet you'll never have so much as an answer to your telegram."

"Surely, for her own sake, she wouldn't——" I had begun desperately to protest, when Anne cut me short.

"Wait, my child. Let me tell you something about Lady Sophie de Gretton. She's the daughter of an

Earl—Lord Sandley, who was always going in for theatrical speculations on a tremendous scale. At last he was ruined, and went bankrupt, or something, so that Lady Sophie, who was a girl then, found her chances of marrying well in danger of being spoiled. She hung on for a long time, and didn't 'go off'—those are the words of one of Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's friends—till at last, rather than be an old maid, she took a Mr. de Gretton, who came of a good family, but had very little money. When he died, about ten or a dozen years ago, she was left poorly off, and was at her wits' ends to know how she could retain her position in society. She had a house, and that was about all—nothing to keep it up with. However, she got on—and do you want to know how?"

"Yes," I returned feebly.

"Well, she began to be famous for presenting heiresses from America or the provinces, and introducing them to her set. Generally they made good marriages, and those 'in the know'—as Mrs. Leatherby-Smith says when she forgets not to be vulgar—are certain that she got at least a thousand pounds a season for every girl she presented, sometimes a lot more. Now, if that's her *métier,* does it stand to reason that she would hamper herself by taking you about, and paying for every dress and pair of shoes you had to your back?"

"I don't wear shoes on my back," I retorted with some asperity, which cloaked dismay. "Very likely there isn't a word of truth in all this gossip; and, any way, why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

"Because you wouldn't give me a chance, my dear child. Don't you think I saw that you were determined not to talk of her? You didn't want to be discouraged, and you were afraid I'd try to set you against her. I didn't suppose then that you'd go home and break off with Mrs. East. I thought that by the time you got to Peckham you'd begin to look on Lady Sophie's wild propositon as a romantic but impossible dream. Of course, if she were a very rich and philanthropic woman she might really be contemplating the idea of adopting you simply because she saw you were so beautiful as to be worthy of better things. But I'm not mistaken in the main facts about Lady Sophie de Gretton, any way, and, believe me, she's not the woman to be capable of a purely unselfish and quixotic act."

I was silent, and, I'm afraid, a little sulky; for Anne's words had buried me under a mountain of depression.

"I don't want you to think I'm just nasty and jealous," Anne went on. (I would never have dreamed of fancying her so; it seemed odd to me that she should suggest such an idea.) "But I must be honest for your own good, and say that if you expect anything from that little adventure of ours in the Park yesterday you'll be laying up disappointment for yourself. Wire Lady Sophie if you like; but I advise you to write at the same time to Mrs. East, and hint that, if she cares to let bygones be bygones, you might be willing to go back."

"Whatever happens, I won't do that!" I exclaimed

emphatically. "I only stayed there so long out of habit, I think—a habit of repression. She was my one living relative, though a distant one; and as I went to her house when I was only fourteen, I have stupidly grown up taking it for granted that I must remain there. Of course, I'm not well-educated, according to conventional ideas of a girl's education, but dear mother taught me faithfully, splendidly, till she died, and I have read all I could whenever I could beg, borrow, or buy a book worth reading since, so that I might at least hope to get a situation as nursery-governess. I can sing, too. You know what a glorious voice mother had, and what pains she took with me. Even though I've had little enough chance to practise, I might get taken on in the chorus of light opera——"

"Whatever you do, don't try the stage, Con," said Anne, "You're too young, too lonely, too pretty, and too poor for that."

"Well," I cried despairingly, "for the present I don't trouble. I mean to give Lady Sophie de Gretton the benefit of the doubt."

"H'm! the benefit of the doubt," incredulously echoed Anne.

Before breakfast Anne and I went out together, walking almost in silence to the nearest telegraph-office, where Anne's shilling paid for my long message to Lady Sophie de Gretton.

I dreaded the meeting with Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, even though I might hope for countenance from my self-appointed advocate, Miss Smith. But Anne ex-

pressed the opinion that it would be unwise for me to absent myself from the breakfast table.

"Mrs. Leatherby-Smith will want to ask questions," she said, "and if you're not there to answer them, she'll think there's something wrong. For my sake, if not for your own, you'd better face the music."

I faced it. Mrs. Leatherby-Smith did ask questions. Breakfast consisted of questions and answers, with a little tea and toast thrown in out of charity by a footman, who scorned my blue serge with a scorn even deeper than his mistress's.

Before the meal was over Mrs. Leatherby-Smith knew all that I knew about my future prospects with Lady Sophie de Gretton; how her drawing-room was furnished, what she had worn, and what she had given us for tea. Anne had not mentioned the adventure on coming home, not being encouraged to private confidences by her employer; nevertheless, Mrs. Leatherby-Smith chose to resent her secretary's taciturnity on this occasion. It was very secretive of Anne to have kept such a matter to herself.

Of course, there was little chance that Lady Sophie would really answer my telegram or take any further notice of me now that yesterday's mood had had time to pass.

In fact, though Mrs. Leatherby-Smith refrained from giving such a reason, the truth was that she was pricked to curiosity. She desired me to remain, that she might know without delay whether I were to be discarded or taken up by so important a personage as Lady Sophie de Gretton. Though she, Mrs. Leath-

erby-Smith, might have been able to buy and sell the Earl's daughter—who had only married a commoner, after all—within her small soul she knew that the set in which Lady Lady Sophie moved, by right of birth and breeding and long association, was as far beyond her reach as the Mountains of the Moon.

I was only nineteen, and far from being a woman of the world, but I was shrewd enough to guess that Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was holding me in her hand, as a balance. Down I would go, till I was worth my weight in gold, if Lady Sophie telegraphed that I was to repair at once, anticipating our arrangement. But, on the contrary, were Anne's and her own gloomy prophecies fulfilled by silence on Lady Sophie's part, I would fly up, a mere feather-weight in Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's estimation—a pitiful feather, to be blown out of doors, whither mattered less than nothing.

As for Miss Smith, she was in a different mood this morning: thoughtful, non-talkative, willing to listen, but inclined to say little. Breakfast ought not to be a conversational meal, she considered. Afterwards, however, while Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and Anne were busy with letter-writing, she asked me to hold the yarn for her knitting as she wound it; and during the progress of the task, in which she did not hurry, I thought she endeavoured to help me forget my anxieties by chatting about her home in Dorsetshire, her cats, her dogs and her Brazilian monkey.

It was half-past eight when I had sent my telegram, and in my mind, as the hours passed on, there was a constant undercurrent of calculation. Suppose it had

been delivered in Park Lane at nine, Lady Sophie might still have been sleeping; but surely she would be awake by ten. If she sent an answer off at once, I ought to have it before eleven.

But eleven came and went, and though I had started many times, thrilling all over at the sound of the door bell, there was no message for me. At twelve Mrs. Leatherby-Smith came into the library, where her sister-in-law and I were sitting, to insist upon Miss Smith accompanying her on a shopping expedition.

"You haven't heard from Lady Sophie yet, I see," she remarked to me with a little sneer. "Oh, well, you can stop till after luncheon. I should say that if three o'clock passed without your hearing, you might as well give up hope. By the way, Mr. Wynnstay, from Holland Park Mansions, has been in to inquire after your health. I understood from Miss Bryden that you had been there by mistake, and he had brought you to my house, supposing I was away for the night. I don't know how he came to fancy that from what I said when I happened to meet him yesterday afternoon; however, that's not the question now. Why was I not told that you were taken ill and fainted at the Mansions?"

"I thought it of so little consequence to you," I excused myself.

"It was rather peculiar. It ought to have been mentioned. Mr. Wynnstay's account of the matter quite took me by surprise. He is an extremely able man—some friends have lately recommended me to employ him as my solicitor—and most benevolent as well. He

requested particularly that I should let him know how you got on, and I would have told him of your hopes from Lady Sophie de Gretton, had it not occurred to me that it would be rather premature to do that. He might laugh in his sleeve at me to-morrow, if I had seemed to believe for a moment that she would keep her word. Solicitors know the world so well!"

"If Lady Sophie should send for me, please don't tell Mr. Wynnstay," I pleaded. "You see, she might not like the circumstances discussed, and would be displeased with any gossip about me."

"You may be sure I would do nothing which could possibly offend Lady Sophie, if you should go to her," said Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, visibly bridling; "though it's too late for there to be much chance of that now."

Breakfast was the only meal which Anne Bryden ate with her employer. Her luncheon was served in the room where she and Mrs. Leatherby-Smith attended to the latter's correspondence, and we shared it to-day. There was but a scant supply for two healthy young women; fortunately for Anne, however, a choking sensation in my throat prevented me from eating. It was half-past one, and there was still no word from Lady Sophie de Gretton. Hope died hard in my heart, but it was dying now.

Luncheon for Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and her guest was at two, and they returned just in time for it, interrupting our humble meal to inquire if I had had a telegram. No? Ah, well, Mrs. Leatherby-Smith had told me so. "Put not your trust in princes." That

was a good text to remember in such circumstances as mine. What did I now intend to do?

I had hardly decided. Anne had lent me a sovereign, and had given me the address of an employment agency to which she thought I might apply. But would Mrs. Leatherby-Smith be willing to let me stop an hour or two longer? It was just possible that even yet——

"Of course you're willing—eh, Caroline?" prompted Miss Smith.

And, having followed her sister-in-law's lead with a comparatively good grace, the mistress of the house and her visitor left us in peace while they went down to luncheon.

Three o'clock, and still no message. I no longer hoped now, and, deeply chagrined, deeply humiliated, I was in Anne's room, putting on my hat, when Thérèse came to summon me to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and Miss Smith were going out for a drive in the Park. They would be gone all the afternoon till time to return and dress for dinner, and Mrs. Leatherby-Smith had some instructions for Miss Bryden to carry out during her absence. She also wished to see Miss Brand, who would doubtless have taken her departure before Mrs. Leatherby-Smith should come home.

So here was an end of it all. Mrs. Leatherby-Smith, despite her ill-nature and pompousness, was quite right, I struggled to assure myself. Lady Sophie de Gretton had thrown me over—whistled me down the wind—and as it was now useless to expect a telegram, there was no longer anything to keep from me.

The sooner I left this house, the better for everyone concerned; and Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was not to be blamed for hurrying me, as she could not have known that her hints would not be needed—that I was already preparing to rid her of my presence without the goad of her urgings.

Anne had not been as sympathetic last night and early this morning, while I still had hope, as I had usually found her; but now that there was no more chance of my visit to Lady Sophie, my meeting with beautiful girls in pink muslin and soldierly young men with clear-cut, brown faces, she was kind, as of old. We went downstairs hand-in-hand, Anne to learn in the drawing-room what work was expected of her in the afternoon, I that my misfortunes might be exulted over.

"Of course, the idea was quite ridiculous from the first," said Mrs. Leatherby-Smith. "I trust it may be a lesson to your pride, Miss Brand. There is that to be thankful for; and then, you have certainly had a night and nearly a whole day of such comfort and —er—luxury as you would not have been able to enjoy if your curious adventure had not led you to leave home. I hope, Miss Brand, that you will find a situation without too much difficulty. And now we must bid you good-day."

"Good-day—and thank you," I echoed dolefully.

She did not offer her hand.

"Good-bye, Miss Smith."

Out came a bright yellow glove, half an inch too long in the fingers.

"Look here, my dear," exclaimed the old lady

briskly: "I haven't been saying much to-day, but I've been thinking a good bit. And before I bid you good-bye—or get off those queer words the French use when they mean 'till we meet again'—I've got a proposal to make to you."

As she spoke, and I looked at her questioningly, there came a ring at the front-door—an imperious rapping of the knocker.

"Lady Sophie de Gretton," solemnly remarked Thomas.

The announcement, the lady's entrance, swept over us like a wave. At its ebb, Mrs. Leatherby-Smith was mentally prostrate on the sands of surprise; I, pale but exultant; Anne and Miss Smith, the only members of the little company not cast high and dry, their outworks shattered.

"How de do, my dear," inquired Lady Sophie with comforting commonplaceness, taking my hand in a pearl suède palm, and giving it, in an easily unconscious manner, the very latest thing in shakes." I came the moment I could after finding your wire. So glad to get you a day or two sooner than we expected."

She glanced toward the two elder women, one of whom was presumably my hostess. I murmured something, and Lady Sophie responded with a careless courtesy which, despite its affability, somehow contrived to place the gorgeous Mrs. Leatherby-Smith and her good sister-in-law on a plane as far removed from her own as Saturn's from the earth.

It was the sort of thing to which one must be born, since it could not be achieved by practice; but my mali-

cious imagination painted Mrs. Leatherby-Smith assiduously cultivating it in future for the undoing of her best-hated friends.

"So kind of you to be nice to the litle girl, and to keep her for me, Mrs. L—er—Leatherby-Smith," Lady Sophie de Gretton went on, with the air of one graciously accepting a personal favour, as she patted the back of my hand, which instinctively clung to hers.

"Mrs. Leatherby-Smith didn't think you would remember me. I was just going away," I could not resist the temptation of saying.

My hostess, who had been on the point of an eager response, visibly wilted; and I repented my vengefulness; for, after all, I had eaten of her bread and salt.

CHAPTER X

I UNDERSTUDY CINDERELLA

LADY SOPHIE DE GRETTON turned her attention exclusively to me, appearing not to hear Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's pathetically expressed hope that she would sit down, keeping us therefore all standing—with the exception of Miss Smith.

I suppose Miss Smith would have stood for the Queen, but she certainly did not see the necessity of doing so for Lady Sophie de Gretton, even though this was the first "title" that had ever entered her sister-in-law's doors.

"As bad luck would have it," Lady Sophie was saying, "I had an 'early whim' this morning. It was going to be a very busy day, and something waked me at seven—so, as I couldn't sleep again, I breakfasted in my room before eight, and was out of the house by half-past. I accomplished a siege of fitting at the dressmaker's, a massage woman who is such a brute that she won't come to one's house, three sales and a charity visit, got home to luncheon at two, found your wire, and—here I am. You and I have oceans to do before Lady Dunbar's ball to-night"—I could almost feel the thrill that went through Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's ample person at this magnificent announcement—"oh, you're going, of course; I've ar-

ranged all that. So now, I think, if you are ready, my child, we had better be off."

"I am quite ready," I answered with alacrity. And then I turned to Mrs. Leatherby-Smith. "Thank you for your kindness in letting me stop," I said, as little stiffly as I could.

She took my hand and pressed it between her two large ones, in the clasp of which it temporarily disappeared, as Jonah disappeared in the jaws of the whale.

"It has been a pleasure, I assure you," she ejaculated, having the grace to turn a deep, beet red. "If I have been able to do you a slight kindness, dear Miss Brand" —how well she remembered my name, of a sudden! —"you can more than return it by coming to see us sometimes, Miss Bryden and me, to tell us all about your gay doings. Of course, we shall probably meet at the houses of Lady Sophie de Gretton's friends"— Lady Sophie's face doubted this supposition—"but that is different. Drop in to lunch or tea whenever you like; you'll always be welcome, and—it would be a great pleasure to me if Lady Sophie found time to come with you."

"So kind of you," breathed Lady Sophie, gazing out of the window.

"And I am thinking of giving a little dinner-party before Ascot. I shall send you both invitations. There will be some very distinguished people. No doubt, Lady Sophie, you will know most of them. If you—if you are disengaged—indeed, any evening you should be free, if you would name it—the invitations are not yet out—I——"

"Thank you so much; quite charming of you. But unfortunately I'm such a busy woman. I'm afraid there's something on for every night till Henley; and, of course, this dear child will go everywhere with me. Later, perhaps—ah, yes, very pleased. Good-bye." A hand-shake which made Mrs. Leatherby-Smith's valued pump-handle affectation appear antediluvian.

I had gone to Miss Smith.

"You were very, very kind to me," I said gratefully. "I don't know how to thank you enough. I hardly see what I should have done last night if you hadn't been so good."

"I liked you," brusquely responded the spinster. "I've generally found, in spite of all nonsense to the contrary, that pretty girls are better inside as well as out than ugly ones. A beautiful soul oozes through the pores, so to speak, and naturally the face is beautiful too. That's why I'm drawn to handsome people. And look here"—she spoke with purposeful distinctness which attracted Lady Sophie's eyes and ears—"things seem to be turning out all right for you; but you don't know how the story'll end yet. If you ever need a friend, here's my address." She took an old-fashioned glazed visiting-card from her case. "Don't forget it, and understand that I shan't forget you, or the welcome I promise you if you should want it. I'm a plain woman; I hardly know what Park Lane looks like, and I can't take you to any balls nor to Henley; but bread's as good as cake when your stomach's empty, my dear. Good-bye, and good luck. I don't grudge you all the fun you can get; I was young once."

I thanked her genuinely, and put the quaint piece of pasteboard away in my shabby purse as she watched me. But my heart was light, and anticipations of a wonderful future frothed in my head like champagne. I did not dream that I would ever care to look at Miss Smith's visiting card again, save as a souvenir of a stranger's kindness. But queer combinations are shuffled with the cards of Fate.

Anne and I bade each other farewell, and a lukewarm invitation that she would lunch with me some day was understood to have dropped from Lady Sophie's lips. I was at a loss to comprehend my patroness.

Why did she desire my companionship, "my dear" me, and pat my hand with the right glove of friendship, while putting Anne Bryden—who was at least as highly placed, socially, as I—politely behind the pale? The subtle differences in her manner formed part of the mystery, and, even while I resented them, captured my imagination.

I wanted to know—there was scarcely anything that I did not want to know; and I looked forward with boundless curiosity, boundless interest, to the rising of the curtain on the first act of my new life.

A smart little brougham waited with conscious superiority at the gate. There was a dignified coachman, and the groom bore a striking resemblance to the footman who had admitted me yesterday to fairyland.

For nineteen years, and up to this moment, I had considered a hansom cab the height of luxury, splendid, but unobtainable; yet curiously enough I now sank

back on olive green satin cushions with a peaceful sense of being in my natural element.

"This is a victoria day—far too hot for a brougham," observed Lady Sophia. "But I am a very poor woman, my child, and have to make up for poverty by preternatural shrewdness. If you can only possess one vehicle, let it be a brougham, practicable though not pleasant for all weathers; and a have a pair of footmen who will submit, by a lightning change, to transform themselves into coachman and groom—one gawky youth in livery left at home to answer the bell and be bullied by the cook. No one except a very clever woman could drive such a four-in-hand, I assure you, my dear; but the exigencies of my life have superinduced cleverness. I hope you won't need to cultivate it; it is very wearing, and makes wrinkles. The recipe for retaining an agreeable dulness is—to marry a rich man. This I am going to lead insensibly up to your doing by driving at once to Woolland's."

I laughed: "I don't see the connection."

"No? That is very pretty and innocent of you. But do you realize that, as it is now four o'clock, we have exactly three hours in which to turn a—I beg your pardon, my dear—the prettiest of Cinderellas into a princess?"

"I knew you had a wand," I ejaculated.

Lady Sophie held up a dove-coloured purse that matched her dress.

"And here it is—the wand that wields a magic sway over the whole world."

I felt my cheeks burn, for I had not understood her whole meaning before.

"Oh!" I stammered. "You are very good, but—but I couldn't let you; I——"

To my surprise—for she was not a woman to blush easily—Lady Sophie changed colour, and looked oddly conscience-stricken.

"Don't be too grateful," she broke in abruptly. "What I shall do for you is nothing, really—only a pleasure. Please believe that always, whatever may happen in future, whatever people may say to you of me. I am happy to-day, and it is you who have made me so. This—this episode brings a certain spice into my life, and—I am truly your friend. You can take everything which you and I will buy to-day with a light heart."

"But," I ventured, fearing to be rude, yet not quite satisfied, "you said just now you were a poor woman, and——"

"I am seldom too poor to indulge myself. I only economize in necessaries, not luxuries, which are too interesting to deny one's self."

Her words were merry, yet her expression was worried, and there was a little nervous line between her keen eyes. She was concealing something from me, I knew; but even if I would have questioned her I could not. The brougham had drawn up before Woolland's, and the footman-groom was opening the door.

During the next three hours I felt more than ever like the creature of a dream. I, who had endured the gift of two second-hand dresses from Mrs. East in the

course of each year, and been conventionally thankful; I, who had worn stays bought in a Peckham sale for two shillings and threepence-halfpenny, stockings that came off brown on my feet, and pink flannelette petticoats!

I, who had survived these experiences, suddenly to find myself let loose among lingerie of pale tinted silk and laced cambric, shoes far superior to the famous glass slippers, cobwebby silken hose, petticoats that might have been ball-dresses, hats that framed my face as if it had been a picture, and last, but by no means least, frocks beyond dreams dreamed in Peckham.

"Of course, these gowns are only ready-made makeshifts," explained Lady Sophie; "but they will serve you until you have something better, and it's fortunate that you have such an easy figure to fit, or we should have been in a fidget about to-night."

"Am I actually going to a ball with you?" I questioned dazedly. "But I can't have been invited."

"I sent a note to Lady Dunbar after luncheon, before I started out to find you, asking if I might bring a young friend who was unexpectedly coming to stay with me; and, of course, she will answer that she's delighted. There'll be a note waiting for me when we get home. And speaking of home, it is quite time we started. I think we have everything that's absolutely essential, and it is nearly seven o'clock. Dinner's at nine—just you and I alone (I got out of a stupid engagement with an old friend), and you ought to have an hour's rest. I want you to be fit and fresh,

for I'm counting on your first appearance to be a great success."

I had never been to a dance in my life.

"Suppose," I ventured, when we were rolling toward Park Lane in the brougham, "that I should do something clumsy, and—and disgrace myself?"

"You are a lady, my dear. No woman, be she duchess or queen, can be more. Don't think I've embarked upon this experiment without studying your accent and your manners, for my reputation is at stake in a certain quarter."

"I wonder what you mean?" I pondered aloud.

"Don't wonder; there's no time for wondering. I forgot to ask—but you look as if you knew how to dance. It's decidedly important for a débutante."

"My mother was an exquisite dancer," I answered rather proudly. "She taught me, because she used to say that, even if I never needed it as an accomplishment, it would make me easy and graceful. I don't know if it has; but I can dance well—all except the new-fashioned things which have come in since then."

"Good. My mind's relieved. Some day you must tell me anything you are willing to tell about your mother, your past, and your life in—Peckham, I think you said? But now we have other matters to occupy our minds. My dear girl—I shall call you Consuelo—do you realize that a great deal depends upon tonight?"

I gazed at her, frightened. We were just driving into Park Lane.

"Luckily," she went on, almost as if speaking to

herself, "the last Drawing-room of the season is over, so that there is the best of excuses for not presenting you. Otherwise it would have been awkward, for such searching questions are asked, and if they can't be satisfactorily answered, there's an end. As it is, there are no obstacles in your way, and you have the ball at your feet—for with a girl as pretty as you are, plenty of men—men worth having, too—care nothing about a *dot*. You must make hay while the sun shines; and, by a natural phenomenon, the sun will begin shining to-night. Trust me for facing you the right way at the start, and—here we are at home."

Such things as I was to wear at the ball we had prudently brought with us in the carriage, and the "gawky youth" of whom Lady Sophie had spoken (he seemed rather a splendid person to me) assisted a French maid in carrying the various parcels to my room.

And what a delicious room it was! I had never seen anything like it, and I could hardly believe that I was to occupy it during the vaguely indefinite elysium of my visit in Lady Sophie de Gretton's house. No greater contrast could be imagined between its lovers'-knotted, convolvulus-wreathed chintzes, its water-color sketches, its bookshelves, its dainty silver-spread dressing-table and mirrors, and the grim, brown, dingy space between four uncompromising walls that I had shared with the children of Mrs. East.

I splashed in a bath-room adjoining my own room; I was clad in silk and lace and nainsook; a blue robe de chambre was slipped on by the smiling Adèle; I

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reposed on frilled pillows scented with lavender, and arose refreshed, though I had been too excited to sleep.

While I rested my hostess had been coifed, and she was free to superintend Adèle's manipulations of my gold-brown curly mop. The French maid had her will of me at first, and decorated me seriously, as if I had been a church on the eve of a feast-day; but when she had finished, Lady Sophie impatiently bade her undo the elaborate work.

"After all, Miss Brand's own way is best," she decided. "She must be regarded as a picture, I find, never as a fashion plate. She has her own striking, original style, and those loose natural waves, with the careless knot, and a curl escaping here and there over the forehead, are more in keeping."

I was thus saved forever from undulations and complicated unspeakabilities.

We dined in tea-gowns—I in a smart new one; and afterwards there was the ball-dress to be put on. It was all white, and it sparkled; when I moved it looked like the spray of a waterfall that glistened in moonlight; and from beneath, with each step I took, there was a rainbow flash from the buckles on little white satin slippers.

"You will do," Lady Sophie pronounced; and she laid down a string of pearls she had held up to my throat. "Such a neck as yours was not meant to have its line broken by paltry jewelery. It's like swan's-down. What lashes those long violet eyes of yours are blessed with, child! Your enemies might think you darkened them and your eyebrows, they are in such

contrast to your bright hair; but I know better. That's right, blush—it's very becoming, and I hope you won't get out of the habit. Now, Adèle, her cloak. It's nearly eleven; I think we might be starting, for Lady Dunbar lives in Cleveland Square."

"By the way," she said, speaking suddenly out of a reverie, when we were once more in the brougham, "do you remember, before I spoke to you in the Park, admiring a handsome girl in pink muslin, and wishing that your lot in life might be like hers, even if it were but for a single month?"

"Yes," I answered expectantly.

"Well, she's Miss Dunbar—the 'Honourable Diana' she's a right to have her letters addressed—and it's to her mother's house we're going to-night."

I sat up excitedly.

"Oh, Lady Sophie, how strange—how very strange!"

"Do you think so? I fail to see why."

"But you don't know all. They, Miss Dunbar and her mother, didn't see me that time in the Park, but afterwards, when Anne and I had left your house and were waiting for an omnibus, their victoria passed through Hamilton Place."

I went eagerly on, and did not cease until I had told the story of the chase to Peckham, and the telegram that had been sent before I lost sight of the victoria and its occupants. Lady Sophie paid me the compliment of listening thoughtfully.

"How exceedingly odd!" she commented. "Of course, there might have been nothing in it; indeed, I don't exactly see what there could be; but certainly,

on the face of it, the thing looks mysterious. What could have taken Lady Dunbar down to Peckham, unless she were following you? She's a peculiar woman, but not as peculiar as that."

This unconscious criticism of the neighbourhood struck my sense of humour, and I laughed. But I did not mention the supposition that had been in my mind, because for some reason, which I hardly analyzed, I did not wish to speak of Sir George Seaforth. I knew that, as the vision in pink was Miss Dunbar, my elucidation of the puzzle had gone wrong, and I was curiously glad; but I could not bring myself to utter his name in my present mood.

My heart was beating very fast, when the brougham stopped before an awning and a long path of crimson cloth. I think a young, untried soldier, about to fight his first battle, must feel somewhat as I did at that moment.

A knot of curious, shabbily-clad folk crowded as near the crimson path as a big policeman would let them. I saw girls dressed much as I had been, before the touch of the magic wand, and a queer little thrill went through me, under their frankly admiring gaze. What was I that I should be here, in satin and film of chiffon, while they were there, in sordid, undistinguishable stuff?

What would they think if they knew that I was more nearly akin to them than to the other radiant butterflies that flitted before me and followed behind? Would they still good-naturedly envy me, as they did now, or would they, with a clearer vision than had

been granted me, behold a dark precipice over which I trifled, unawares?

Lady Sophie de Gretton's little house in Park Lane was daintily pretty; Lady Dunbar's big house in Cleveland Square was magnificent. Having passed through a vestibule, and taken off our cloaks in a room that appeared to be all mirrors, we came out into a great hall, marvellous with mellow pictures and tapestries, brilliant with hundreds of wax candles in old-fashioned crystal chandeliers, and having a wide marble staircase that wound up to regions yet unseen.

I thought of Burne-Jones's "Golden Stair," a copy of which I had once seen and never forgotten, for up and down moved figures bright and fair as angels. Among so many beautiful women, what was I? Even the men here were gorgeous in uniforms, or with orders shining on ribbons that crossed the severe black and white of their evening dress. There was at least one Indian potentate, in native splendour, with a turban that blazed with diamonds; but nowhere did I see the hostess or her pretty daughter.

I longed for, yet dreaded the moment. If I were right, and Lady Dunbar had been actually moved to emotion by the sight of my face as she passed it in the street, I could not help thinking that she would be far more moved at beholding me under her own roof, dressed, not merely clothed, civilized, chaperoned. I stepped to distant music; I felt that I was to be leading lady in the drama about to begin.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST ACT OF THE PLAY

We fought our way upstairs, but somehow we still missed the hostess. Later I was to guess why. At the top Lady Sophie met a number of people whom she knew, and, having something to say to her friends, listened to a murmured request from a young Guardsman, all moustache and monocle. What he said I could not hear, but an introduction to me presently followed, and I was borne away for a dance.

We had a waltz in a large ballroom, with a floor which I agreed with my partner in thinking "heavenly," and then, as my idea of making conversation had produced the remark that the night was very warm, he proposed that we should seek a certain cool nook known to him of old.

"Sit out the next with me and have an ice, won't you?" he suggested. "Yon don't know what a jolly place I'm going to take you to. Miss Dunbar says Lady Dunbar always gives orders to have it locked before a ball or dance, as for some reason or other she doesn't care to have people going there; but Miss Dunbar, who is no end of a rippin' girl, has bribed a servant to leave the door open."

"Perhaps we oughtn't——" I meekly began, in my

ignorance that the rule of really "smart" society is to do what one likes without regard to the feelings of anyone else; but Captain Weyland hastened to cut me short.

"Rather! You just trust me to look after you, Miss Brand. It will be all right."

"But won't Lady Sophie be expecting me to come back at the end of the dance?" I uncomfortably pleaded.

"Not she! She's too awfully rippin'. Come along."

And I went.

We walked down the length of a corridor, up some steps, into a room, and on until we reached an odd but beautiful space that looked down into a courtyard below, filled with flowers. It appeared to be a combination of conservatory, aviary, and boudoir; and I could imagine why, if Lady Dunbar regarded the prejudices of a few rare birds she kept there, she might desire to lock out unsympathetic strangers.

Captain Weyland, who was rather a good-looking as well as an impudent young man, ensconced me among the cushions of a *tête-à-tête* sofa, and announced his intention of setting forth in search of ices. There were sure to be a lot going about (he alluded to them as if they had been pilgrims), and he wouldn't be away three minutes.

I hoped that he would be more, and when his back was turned I settled myself to a hasty readjustment of my disordered mind. I had hardly assured myself that I really was Consuelo Brand, and no other, when I heard the sound of voices behind a velvet curtain, em-

broidered with gold and silver in Japanese fashion, which filled in one end of the room.

"It's locked, there's no danger of anybody being there," said a woman in full, deep contralto tones. "I always give orders that I can't have this one place disorganized; it's too near my own rooms. Tell me, quick, all you have to tell. I must go back in a moment; already people must be wondering, though fortunately it's a crush. How can anyone expect to find the hostess?"

I sprang up, anxious to make my unwelcome presence known, yet doubtful how best to do it, and more than a little frightened, for there could be no doubt that behind that curtain was the formidable Lady Dunbar—the heroine of the victoria.

"The girl may have the papers, or she may not," responded a man, whose voice, low and cautious as it was, sounded oddly familiar. "It all depends on her knowledge of the escritoire. Myself, I should say she knew nothing, or her knowledge would have been used before this."

"That may merely mean lack of money, lack of self-confidence, or friends. Great Heaven, that I should be at the mercy of a creature like that! If only you——"

"Here's the ice!" triumphantly exclaimed Captain Weyland. "I wasn't long, was I?"

Silence on the other side of the curtain. To face my companion, I had to turn my back in that direction, and my spine seemed to creep under the sensation that eyes were fixed upon it. Thank goodness, if eyes

were peering, the fact that my back was turned and that a sheltering screen intervened would prevent me from being seen now and recognised later.

It was an effort to talk commonplaces and give the thanks that were due for the ice. I had heard very few words, and I could not patch them together for a meaning, but they had a strange sound for a night of festivity.

What girl had what papers? And if she had or had not got them, what was that to me? The tantalizing scrap of conversation which I had no right to overhear, and had not meant to overhear, could not possibly concern me, it seemed; yet the mention of an escritoire had touched a keynote. I had an escritoire, old-fashioned, valueless, save for association.

The word "escritoire" had suddenly reminded me that the poor piece of property which had come into my possession through my dear mother's death had been left at Happiholme Villa, unthought of, disregarded. That I had forgotten it until this moment seemed like neglect of my mother's precious memory.

My few miserable bits of wearing apparel were of no importance. Cousin Sarah East might give them to a dealer in rags for all I cared now; but the escritoire was different. I ought not for a moment to have allowed it's existence to slip my mind.

No doubt there were millions of escritoires in the possession of millions of girls all over the world; but the words spoken by the man's voice, representing an unseen personality, lingered in my thoughts as I tried to chat with Captain Weyland. I must go back to

Happiholme Villa and reclaim the escritoire without delay.

What if Lady Dunbar and her companion behind the curtain had meant me? Of course they hadn't! It was ridiculous, and conceited too, to fancy it; but, at all events, the subject they had discussed had been of serious importance to them, and I would have liked to know how they had stood the shock of our unexpected interruption.

How dead the silence was behind the curtain! Were those two lingering, watching, listening in their turn, or had they gone away? What if they should lift the velvet folds and come into this room, to see who had disturbed them, who had overheard? Lady Dunbar would not care to think that the girl she had followed in her victoria (if she had indeed condescended to follow) was the eavesdropper, knowingly or not.

As Captain Weyland talked, other voices seemed to hum in an ominous undertone near the portals of my ear, though I was well aware they existed only in my fancy; and having hurriedly disposed of half the pink ice peach he had brought me, I ungratefully said that I must go back to Lady Sophie—already I had stopped away too long.

"They haven't finished the dance after ours yet," Captain Weyland reproached me, "and you promised to sit it out. However, we must try to find Lady Sophie, if you're determined on spoiling my evening."

I denied this intention, but persevered in my resolve. And though the Guardsman's eyes were not as observant as they might have been, with assistance from me

we contrived to discover my chaperon in a room adjoining the ballroom. We threaded our way towards her, and having nearly sailed into port, were headed off by a man who had discovered Lady Sophie almost simultaneously.

He hurried to gain her side; I half drew back, biting my lip, for the new-comer was none other than Sir George Seaforth. Did I wish him to see me now, or did I not? I was not sure; but the dew-spangled cobweb of gauze over my breast was quickly rising and falling.

It was too late to draw back, unless I were willing to let Captain Weyland believe that I had changed my mind, and decided to dance the next with him, as he had requested. So I let him guide me on; and then, behind Sir George Seaforth's back, we paused for an instant by instinctive mutual consent, to allow a sentence to be finished before we should interrupt.

"If only it weren't too late!" he was saying, with some feeling. "Just my luck, and serves me exactly right, I suppose; but, for all that, it is rather hard lines. If you could see what an angel of beauty she was, you'd understand how absolutely she would have filled the place——"

"Ah, here's the little friend I was telling you of!" interpolated Lady Sophie, who had caught sight of me, with Captain Weyland, over Sir George Seaforth's well-set-up shoulders. There was an inscrutable light in her eyes, though her face wore its laziest smile. "Consuelo, dear, you are very naughty to have stopped away so long. I was afraid you and Captain Weyland

had not been able to find me. May I introduce Sir George Seaforth?"

He turned, and we looked into each other's eyes. I don't know what mine said, and I did not dare to try to read his. Perhaps I could not if I would. But, whatever else was there, I think surprise was the predominant emotion.

No, I was not engaged for the next waltz. The lancers would be over in a moment. I felt that my responses were prim and inadequate, my manner awkward; for the first time I became painfully conscious of my hands, and did not seem able to keep them from fidgeting with my fan—that new, expensive fan which it would be so disastrous to break.

Presently we went away together, leaving Lady Sophie talking to an ample dowager, who wore plumes on somebody else's hair. I was conscious that his eyes were upon me, but I could not look up.

CHAPTER XII

MUST HE WHO BREAKS PAY?

IT was a relief to begin the dance, and it was a joy to continue, for Sir George Seaforth could waltz as few men could. I was in a dream when it was over, and he took me into the conservatory; a conservatory was the conventional thing, I had heard, though I knew nothing from experience.

"Why were you so surprised?" I heard myself asking, and then felt that I should have preferred to say anything rather than that.

Sir George Seaforth looked at me as if he would read my thoughts.

"Why was I so surprised?" he echoed. "You mean, when I saw that—you were you?"

"Yes."

"Why should I not have been surprised? It was the last thing in the world I expected. If I had thought of it, I should have believed it far too good to be true."

"But you heard my name last night. If you had remembered you might have——"

"Remembered?"

He laughed in an odd way.

"I have remembered little else. Consuelo Brand! It's not a name to forget, even if the owner—but you

know what a peculiar manner Lady Sophie has of pronouncing the letter *r*. I thought she said that the —the friend who had come to visit her was Miss Bland. I had just been telling her——"

He paused abruptly, and frowned, as if he were annoyed at his own indiscretion.

"Do finish the sentence," I pleaded, longing to know what he would say, and recalling with a tingle of the nerves each word Captain Weyland and I had caught as we waited our turn to approach Lady Sophie.

Again he looked at me strangely, his gray eyes wistful as well as searching. Suddenly it flashed back to me how Lady Sophie had apparently tried to keep us apart when he had called during Anne's and my visit, and how Anne had surmised that he was "part of the mystery." The expression of his face tended to confirm this surmise of hers, and I would have given much if it had been possible for me to frankly question him.

If I had any power of judging character, he was sweet-tempered, yet hot-tempered at the same time; impulsive, more than a little obstinate, and fond of having his own way—he had not that prominent chin, deeply cleft in the middle, for nothing, I was sure—proud to a fault, perhaps a bit conceited, headstrong, and quick to draw himself within a shell of reserve if strangers endeavoured to pass such barriers as he chose to erect. Still, despite all this, somehow I was not in the least afraid of him.

I felt that I might say almost anything without danger of being misunderstood; that, though it was not

his nature to be either patient or forbearing, I might count on his being both with me. It was not fear that closed my lips, but a feeling which I could not have explained, although without putting it into words I understood it, and knew that it concerned only myself.

"I might finish my sentence in two ways," he said slowly. "And both would be equally truthful. I might pay you a compliment, or I might—I might say something which would disgust you with me, and end all chance of—the friendship I hope to win from you by-and-by. To do the first might offend you, and—I confess I haven't the moral courage for the other."

"You puzzle me," I returned. "I don't understand you."

"They say, when a woman understands a man he can no longer hope to interest her. That is one of the reasons why I'm glad you don't understand me."

"Then there are several reasons? You are certainly rather mysterious. But everything is mysterious lately."

"Naturally, to you. Life is life, and you are a débutante. I shouldn't wonder if this were your first ball."

"I hope I haven't done anything dreadful to make you guess it so soon. But it's true. Only two days ago, if anyone had told me that I should ever go to a ball, I should have thought they were mad, or making fun of me."

I paused in the flow of my confidences, blushing hotly; for there was my duty to my benefactress, and I did not think that Lady Sophie would care to have the sordid past of her young guest known and dis-

cussed. Perhaps the reason she had disliked the idea of our meeting yesterday was because she had not wished Sir George to see me for the first time in my shabby clothes. It had been for the sake of sparing my pride that she had desired to keep us apart; and in that case there was no mystery at all so far as Sir George Seaforth was concerned.

Lady Sophie did not guess that destiny had seen fit, for some playful purpose of its own, to thwart her well-laid scheme, and perhaps I would never confess. I could see no reason now why I should. Nevertheless, even as it was, Sir George knew nothing of my former circumstances, except that he had twice seen me yesterday poorly clad, and once in a position of some difficulty. I might have been masquerading in my cheap garments, for all that he could tell, and for Lady Sophie's sake, though not for my own, I would check my impulse towards unnecessary confidences.

"Didn't your people approve of dances?" my companion encouraged me to go on.

"Er—not for me, at any rate," I answered quite truthfully, with a twinkle in my eyes. I imagined Cousin Sarah East's attitude towards a request of mine to attend such an entertainment. "But I love it—oh, how I love dancing! I was never so happy in my life—at least, since my mother left me—as I am to-night."

"How many dances will you give me? I oughtn't to be selfish, but do let me have six!"

"Would that be the usual thing—really, truly? You see, I don't know, so I must depend on you to tell me."

"Well, if you put me on honour, perhaps I'm asking too much for your first ball. But I think I may beg for four with a clear conscience, if you don't mind being good-natured and letting me have them."

"I like it!" I had exclaimed before I had time to ask myself whether frankness were fashionable for young maidens in society. "You dance so splendidly," I compromised.

"Our step did suit, didn't it? I'm so glad. It seems somehow like a good omen."

"Are you a soldier?" I asked abruptly. "You walk like one, and, I fancy, dance like one, too."

"That's rather a sore point, but I don't dislike talking of it with you. I used to be a soldier; it was my life, the thing I cared for most on earth. But I had solemnly promised my father that when he died, and I came into the title, I'd chuck the army and take up his work, which meant to him all and more than being a soldier meant to me. You see, he was awfully interested in improving the condition of the working people, and as charity begins at home, he had done a lot for our tenants. I hoped he would live to be a very old man, and I expected when I made that promise to get twenty more good years of soldiering at least; but he died—dear old governor!—quite suddenly a year ago; and his last word to me was, 'Remember!' I knew what he was thinking of, and satisfied him that I wasn't going to break my word. Now, I seem to have told you a lot about myself. Won't you tell me something of yourself, too? Fancy, I'd spent all day

trying to think how I was to meet you again; and here you are."

"My story isn't written yet; I am only in the first chapter," I said demurely.

"Then I'm in that first chapter. What luck for me, even if my part be but a small one! I hope, though, I'm not going to turn out the villain of the tale."

I glanced up at him as we walked slowly back toward the ballroom.

"You don't look much like a villain."

A slight contraction drew his level dark brows together, and his lips were compressed, as if with a thought that gave him pain.

"You mustn't judge by appearances," he said. "There's disinterested advice to a dèbutante. If there ever has been anything of the villain about me, I'm going to set to work and write it out of my story tonight. I wonder if one can do that? What do you think? Does he who breaks always have to pay—pay with the one immediate jewel of his soul, the only coin the gods will accept? But how could you have an opinion on that subject, Miss Brand? Good music, isn't it, and a jolly floor? We're just in time for this galop. I wish it had been a waltz."

His arm slid round my waist, and I danced, feeling more than ever puzzled, partly because of his question, but more because of his quick change of voice and subject. We did not stop until the galop was over. Next came the waltz that Sir George Seaforth had wished for, and when it had ended, all too soon, I asked that

he would take me to Lady Sophie. We would have those other dances later, if he liked.

As we walked acrossed the room together I could not help noticing that almost everyone seemed to be particularly interested in us. They looked at me, and looked again. In a lower rank of society I think the gaze might have degenerated into a stare.

"I do hope my hair isn't coming down, or anything the matter with my frock," I exclaimed almost beseechingly to Lady Sophie, when we had reached her side at last.

I had spoken in a low, distressed voice, but Sir George must have heard the words, for his eyes and Lady Sophie's met, and both smiled.

"It has begun," she remarked to him. Then, turning to me, "Don't be alarmed, dear; you are quite right. Yours is a new face, that's all. People are wondering who you are. I was talking with Lady Dunbar only a few minutes ago—unearthed her at last!—and told her something about you. She is quite curious to see you now."

"There's Miss Dunbar," said Sir George Seaforth, "with Captain Weyland."

A few seconds later a radiant being, a more beauteous development of yesterday's vision in pink muslin, was speaking to Lady Sophie in a soft, sweet voice.

For the moment a classical profile was turned towards me, and my fascinated eyes lingered upon its cameo-like outlines.

She was even lovelier than I had thought her yesterday as she had leaned back by her mother's side in

the victoria. And yet perhaps "lovely" was hardly the word to describe this Honourable Diana, who looked as if the earth were an iced cake for her careless fingers to pick to pieces and find all the best plums.

She was tall as her fabled namesake, and her perfect features were of the aquiline type, her conspicuously short upper lip thin and red as wet coal. The eyes, which were absolutely of almond shape, and very large, were as black as eyes ever are, and had heavy white lids, darkly fringed above and below. The hair, elaborately dressed, and wound with a string of pearls over the low forehead, was of an almost unnaturally bright chestnut, appearing all the more vivid because of the dead white of the beautiful face, smooth and colourless as the petals of a pond lily.

Miss Dunbar said something commonplace and agreeable to Lady Sophie, and then turned to me. Lady Sophie had mentioned that she had a guest. It was so nice of me to have come. Miss Dunbar hoped that I had been dancing a great deal. Her mother had said that she wished to meet me. I was rather like someone she had once known—an old friend now dead. Would I mind being introduced, if there happened to be some dances I didn't fancy, so that I wouldn't feel that I was wasting time?

My heart gave a little thump. It seemed to me that a first conversation with Lady Dunbar could hardly fail to be interesting.

CHAPTER XIII

LADY DUNBAR AND A CATECHISM

THE next dance was the "Washington Post," imported from the States long since the days when I had learned dancing from a skilled and loving teacher. I therefore did not know it, and did not wish to take a lesson in public, though Sir George Seaforth offered to give it, and argued the point for some time.

I would go instead to Lady Dunbar, I said, and Lady Sophie de Gretton's eyes sparkled with controlled curiosity in anticipation of the scene at which she would not be present.

"Let me take you to Lady Dunbar," exclaimed Sir George.

Miss Dunbar shrugged her white, lavishly-displayed shoulders with the pettish air of a spoiled beauty.

"How horrid of you to have forgotten that you made me promise last week to dance the 'Washington Post' with you! It isn't at all the proper thing for me to remind you of it, but you know I'm not a particularly well-regulated young person, and I hate sitting out. Miss Brand doesn't want to dance, and Captain Weyland loathes the 'Post.' Providence evidently intended that he should guide her to my mother."

"Of course I didn't forget; I only forgot that this was the 'Washington Post,'" asseverated Sir George

Seaforth. "Awfully good of you to keep it. Don't forget that the next is ours, Miss Brand."

He looked at me no more, as Captain Weyland said agreeable things, and prepared to be my pilot between the Scylla and Charybdis of the crowd. But for all that, though Miss Dunbar had his eyes and his most courageous attention—and she was beautiful enough to hold both; probably far, far handsomer than I—I had a curiously peaceful, blissful feeling that I kept Sir George Seaforth's thoughts, and carried them away with me across the room.

"Pretty girl, Miss Dunbar, isn't she?" remarked Captain Weyland. "She's in splendid form to-night."

"She's handsomer than anyone I ever saw," I answered.

"So a lot of people think. She's been no end run after since she came out a year ago. She was quite the beauty of last season, and has held first place this season, too, without any trouble; it's been a walk over for her till now—everybody ravin' about her, most of the best fellows danglin' on her line, and that sort of thing, you know. Wonder if she won't shy at a rival?"

"Has she one?" I asked.

"Has she one! That's pretty good, isn't it? I should rather think she had—after to-night. It's been a regular sensation."

"Dear me! Is the girl here, then? I'd like to see her. It seems almost impossible that anyone could be handsomer than Miss Dunbar."

"So she thought, I fancy. Look here, Miss Brand, you come from Devonshire, don't you?"

"I don't—er—I mean no. Why do you ask?"

"Well, there are some Brands there, and—er—the girls are so awf'lly refreshin'ly innocent in Devonshire. Would you really like to see Miss Dunbar's rival attraction? I'll show her to you at the end of this room before we get to Lady Dunbar."

I thanked him. Now that I was sure my frock and hair were above reproach, it was rather fun to have people look at me as they did. I began to think that I must really present quite a respectable appearance in a pretty frock.

"There she is!" said Captain Weyland, stopping suddenly and bringing me to a standstill too.

My eyes travelled inquiringly, but without result except for my own reflection in a huge mirror that ran from floor to ceiling. I gave a little gasp, and—comprehended.

"How unkind of you to make fun of me!" I ejaculated.

"Make fun? 'Pon my honour, I was in dead earnest; thought I was puttin' it rather nicely, too. My word, Miss Brand, you're going to make havoc among us for what's left of the season! As you are strong, be merciful, I beg. And look in the society columns of all the newspapers to-morrow if you don't believe what I say."

Compliments are popularly supposed to be pleasant fare for a woman, but these, coming after nineteen years' fasting, choked me and sent the blood with such a rush to my head that tears were forced into my eyes.

"There's Lady Dunbar," I said hurriedly.

"Oh, you know her, then?"

"Not to speak to. I—I've only seen her once before."

A moment after Captain Weyland was introducing me, in such a manner that I guessed he must be an old friend and favourite of Lady Dunbar's, and he did not neglect to mention, by way of making conversation, that this was not the first time I had seen my hostess.

A flash of fire darted from her dark eyes to mine at this announcement, so quickly that it might have been a ray from the diamond tiara on her night-black hair.

"Indeed?" she repeated. "I could almost be certain that we had not met, Miss Brand. Yours is not a face to forget, especially as it—recalls the past."

"We did not meet," I responded meekly. "I saw you——"

"Where?" with veiled eagerness.

For an instant I hesitated. If there were no other mystery in the events of the past two days, she was a mystery, or at least her apparent interest in me was no less, and if I wished to fathom it (as I naturally did) I must be wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove. I must begin well, for never afterwards, if I made a false start now, could I recover lost ground.

"It was in the Park, yesterday afternoon. You and Miss Dunbar were driving together, I think," was my circumspect answer.

"Ah, was that all? How nice of you to remember our faces through twenty-four hours! But, then, this is surely your first season. I should like to have a

little talk with you, if you really don't mind missing this one dance."

"I can't dance it," I bluntly replied.

"Run away, then, Jerry"—to Captain Weyland—"like a good boy. I want Miss Brand to myself."

"I hope you won't be torn quite to pieces here, in this whirlpool. But that's the penalty of talking with the hostess. Tell me: you only saw me in the Park yesterday?"

I could not be guilty of a deliberate lie.

"I—fancied I saw you afterwards, but wasn't sure."

"Where was that?"

"Oh, in Hamilton Place at first."

"And after——"

"I was going down to Peckham, and—I thought—I couldn't be certain, of course."

Lady Dunbar smiled upon me; but though her smile was brilliant it was singularly cold—cold as moonlight or mountain snow.

"It must have been I," she pleasantly admitted. "My daughter and I work as hard as the rest of our friends at amusing ourselves, but we try to do a little something for others, too; and we occasionally take a few trifles to a poor woman in Peckham. We went to see her yesterday. So you were going in that direction, too? Rather an odd coincidence."

"Not as odd as it seemed," I remarked to myself, considering I had lived there for five years. But aloud I said nothing. I merely smiled a non-committal smile.

"So out of the way, isn't it?" murmured Lady Dun-

bar. "Though one doesn't grumble when it's for charity, of course. Do you often go to Peckham?"

"Rather often. But I don't expect to do so as frequently in future," I made demure reply.

"Ah, you will be with my dear Lady Sophie for some time. I am glad of that. Diana would like to know you. You must get Lady Sophie to spare you to us sometimes. You know, you look remarkably like a friend of my youthful days—a very beautiful woman, I may tell you. Her name was Margaret Sylvester. I wonder if, by any possibilty, you are related to her?"

I shook my head.

"No, Lady Dunbar, I never even heard the name before."

"I am disappointed," she declared. But, an odd contradiction to the statement, her face cleared.

"If she had been even a distant relative of yours, you could, of course, not have failed to hear of her."

I was tempted to say that I might easily have failed, since I knew absolutely nothing of my relatives, save Cousin Sarah East, of whom I knew too much. But I remembered my *métier,* which was to learn all I could, and betray nothing. I therefore only remarked that if I had heard so pretty a name as Margaret Sylvester, I should not have forgotten it.

"I am surprised that Sophie de Gretton never spoke of you to me before," Lady Dunbar continued, with a weary note of irritation in her face, which she tried in vain to subdue. "I suppose your people and hers are old friends."

"I look like someone she used to know," I returned.

"Perhaps she, too, takes an interest in me on account of Margaret Sylvester."

I had meant to be so prudent, but if I had deliberately worked up to this point, when I might disconcert the enemy by throwing a bombshell into his lines, I could not have succeeded more thoroughly.

Lady Dunbar was not a character in Adelphi melodrama, therefore she did not pant or start violently, or, indeed, exhibit any other notable sign of discomposure. But she drew in her lips, and there was a flicker of the sharply-cut nostrils, expanding and contracting like those of a vicious horse.

"Has she said anything to make you think that, Miss Brand?"

"No, it was merely my imagination."

"You have a vivid one. It must be a pleasure to you. But surely your people——"

"I am all my own people—at present."

What induced me to add those last two words I do not know, but for some reason they pricked Lady Dunbar as if I had stabbed at her with the tiny point of a penknife.

CHAPTER XIV

A SURPRISE FOR COUSIN SARAH

"In a day or two I will go to Peckham and take away mother's escritoire from Cousin Sarah East's house," I promised myself among my pillows at three o'clock in the morning, after Lady Dunbar's ball. But, needless to say, the intention went to lay another paving-stone in a place no well-brought-up young woman ever mentions, except in church.

Life was a kaleidoscope, with each flowery turn of the rainbow wheel more brilliant than the last. I was a success, it appeared, and every hour had its separate engagement. There was a good deal of hard work as well as pleasure; but on the whole it seemed an easier thing to turn in a single day from a Peckham nursery governess into a butterfly of society than I could have supposed possible; though perhaps, as my patroness declared, that came of being a gentlewoman to begin with.

Lady Sophie's place at the breakfast-table was heaped with invitations each morning—invitations in which I shared—and we accepted all that we could undertake without actually inducing immediate nervous prostration. I must have had to talk, on an average, with a hundred different people every day, and I won-

dered at myself as I saw how easily I picked up the jargon of society.

I chatted about the book of the hour (which I had glanced at as Adéle brushed my hair); I exhaustively criticised the De Reszkes and Madame Melba (whom I had heard twice, when Sir George Seaforth gave us his box at Covent Garden); I babbled of actors and actresses whom I had never seen, and did not hesitate to discuss the rival merits of horses for the not-far distant Ascot.

I even ventured, by the end of a week, to risk dropping my *g's,* that one combined touch of nature and affectation where the two extremes of society meet.

In all this there was no time to think of Happiholme Villa, which seemed now to have belonged to a past incarnation.

In the morning we slept or shopped, and Lady Sophie's generosity to me was boundless. I dared not express a wish lest it should be instantly granted, and it appeared to me that her idea of poverty must be an elastic one. In the afternoons we went to "at homes" in the Botanical Gardens, or tooled out to Ranelagh on Sir George Seaforth's coach, or amused ourselves in some other way, with a large contingent of young men usually following in our wake. There seemed to be a great many young men in this new world of mine, and few of them had anything to do, save amuse themselves and us; or if they had anything else, they carefully refrained from doing it. But other men might come, other men might go; there was

always Sir George Seaforth. Lady Sophie de Gretton said that he was a very, very old friend of hers.

In the evenings there was always somebody's dinner, or Lady Sophie gave a small one of her own, perhaps at Willis's Rooms or the Savoy, as her dining-room was strictly limited. Afterwards there was the opera or theatre, or two or three dances and a concert; so it came about that while this kaleidoscopic existence was still a novelty, I thought no more of my mother's property which should have been reclaimed from Peckham; and I drank deep of the sweet draught of flattery which was held to my lips.

I loved the flowers which were sent to me because they were "tribute," as well as because of their beauty. I was inwardly pleased with the paragraphs in the society papers, that described me as a "radiant new star that had just risen over the horizon." I experienced a sense of intoxication when editors of women's magazines wrote Lady Sophie asking permission to reproduce my photograph, and fashionable photographers begged an opportunity of "taking me" for nothing.

It was especially delightful to have a new rose named after me; and there was a wicked joy in watching the face of Miss Dunbar, who happened to be present when the news of this compliment was broken to me by the enthusiastic horticulturist, an eligible, if elderly, baronet. Altogether, if I had time for self-examination, I should have seen that the sudden change in my circumstances had flown to my head, that I was growing vain and taking everything for granted, and that, when

the time should come, as maybe it soon would, for me to be driven out from this land of enchantment, I should be in a sad condition to catch up the thread of my old existence where I had let it drop.

But weeks passed by, and Ascot came and went; yet there had been no word, no hint, from Lady Sophie that it was time my wonderful visit drew to a close. One night, when I had been too tired to sleep, the glamour passed away from before my eyes like a cloud, as they stared wakefully into the darkness. I saw myself and my surroundings more as they really were in relation to each other than I had yet done, shivering as if a cold wind had nipped me.

Next morning, at a late breakfast, when the footman had left us alone over tea and toast and strawberries, I spoke to Lady Sophie. She had been sorting out a new batch of invitations, some of which would be accepted, others which were undesirable, or could not by any means be fitted in, and some which were for very far ahead.

"Maybe I won't be with you then," I said uneasily.

"Not with me! Why, you surely haven't been making independent plans for Goodwood?"

"No, of course not. But I can't keep on visiting you for ever."

Lady Sophie bit her lip, and looked vexed or uncomfortable, I was not sure which.

" We did not put any limit on the visit when we first arranged that you should come, so far as I can remember, dear," she replied, interesting herself in the union of a strawberry and some Devonshire cream.

"You did ask me if I would be willing to throw everything over for the sake of a fortnight. It was early in June then, and now it's the first of July."

"Oh, but that was a joke. I thought you quite understood. You will stop with me till the end of the season, of course. There's Henley in a day or two, and, as I was just telling you, Sir George has asked us for his house-party at Goodwood. Then comes Cowes—you're so fond of the water, you'll enjoy Cowes. And that reminds me: we must see about your frocks at once. After that—well, who knows just what may happen?"

"That's just what worries me?" I said. "Who does know? I am accepting so much from you, dear Lady Sophie. If I had been a princess, instead of a poor little waif, you couldn't have done more. I dare not think what you must have spent on my clothes; and —and lots of other things."

Her face contracted with an odd little spasm of the nerves, as it often did if I alluded to her many kindnesses.

"Doesn't it seem to you that I ought now to begin looking the future in the face, and preparing to meet it? Of course, I am more than happy with you, and I have never got over the feeling of being in fairyland, as if I'd lifted a stone under a hollow tree, and gone down a thousand steps, like the children in the German story-books. But they always had to go back to the real world after awhile, and so must I. Hadn't I better see some agent for governesses, and ask——"

"I don't think it will be necessary," replied Lady

Sophie dryly. "I took a great fancy to you when I first saw you, as I explained; and during these weeks that you have been with me I have grown very fond of you—even more fond than I supposed possible, with such a selfish woman as I confess to being. Still, I can't keep you for ever, as you remind me, and it is only right that you should look to the future. But has it never occurred to you, my child, that you will have many opportunites of remaining forever in the world to which I've introduced you?"

Vain as I had become, I had not yet outgrown the habit of blushing.

"You mean—oh, of course, I know what you mean, though it seems horrid to talk of it."

"You have had several proposals already, dear," Lady Sophie continued, with no hesitating timidity on her part: "not quite what I should have cared for you to accept, perhaps; but they are only an earnest of what are sure to come. If I cared to mention names——"

"Oh, don't—don't, please," I broke in, with a face that felt scarlet.

"Well, I won't!" said Lady Sophie. "But there's one thing I'd better say, once for all, and have it done with. If you have half the good sense I've tried to inculcate in you, you'll choose a rich man. It's just as easy to fall in love with a man who has money as with one who hasn't. People have got the impression that you are an heiress——"

"How dreadful!" I exclaimed. "I don't see why, except for the pretty dresses you have——"

"I have played our cards as judiciously as I knew how, my child. You are the daughter of a dear dead school friend of mine, and have lived all your life buried in the country with guardians who were very strict in their ideas. There's more or less truth in all that; quite enough truth for society, on the principle that it's wrong to cast pearls before—well, you know the rest. I have been reserved, yet not secretive, in my way of speaking of you, and naturally, people haven't gone so far as to ask direct questions, except Valencie Dunbar, who has certainly taken the most morbid interest. Why I can't guess, unless through jealousy for Diana; and the slight mystery that surrounds your antecedents has only heightened the attraction. I'm afraid that I don't often take up penniless girls, and put myself to much trouble on their account, so that you can understand why gossip has accredited you with a fortune of your own. You are very beautiful, uncommonly fresh and original, and bewitching; still, you mustn't let vanity blind you to the fact that ineligibles may seek the heiress; eligibles are the only ones you can safely count on as disinterested. By the way that half the women in London hate you already (with Diana Dunbar at the head of the list), I should fancy that in a few weeks more you might almost have your pick among the men they all want."

I thought of the one man I wanted, and dared not hope wanted me, lest I should expect too much of lavish destiny; and for fear that Lady Sophie should speak his name, and break the sweet spell of silence

with a jarring note like a snapped string on a violin, I hurried to change the subject. Whether or no fate were in it, I know not, but the words which sprang into my mind and got themselves uttered concerned the escritoire and the neglected visit to Peckham.

"I needn't make any trouble, you know, for I'd go alone, of course, in an omnibus," I meekly suggested. "Then, if you wouldn't mind my having the escritoire here—or I could store it somewhere, perhaps."

Lady Sophie had listened attentively to my account, given for the first time, of what I had overheard behind the curtain at Lady Dunbar's, and though she agreed with me in thinking that the words regarding an escritoire had only seemed to concern me by a mere coincidence, she saw no reason why I should not retrieve my one valued possession from the stronghold of the Easts.

"You can have it in your room," she said. "And you shan't go in an omnibus. I thought, when I first proposed your coming here, that it would be well not to call for you in my own carriage, as we did not want the whole neighbourhood roused to curiosity, and trying to find out where you were going. But it is rather different now. You have established your position, and at worst, if by any possibility Peckham gossip could penetrate to Mayfair, it would hardly be believed. My little hints as to your past are too thoroughly grounded; and it seems to me that, after your cousin's treatment of you, it would be amusing to descend upon and overwhelm her with all the grandeur we can muster. I am rather fond of amateur

theatricals, when no bothering rehearsals are required.

"You did overwhelm Mrs. Leatherby-Smith," I said, laughing.

"Yes, the vulgar creature. I did it with set purpose. If she'd been nice to you, we would not only have martyrized ourselves by accepting her stupid invitation for dinner, which came a fortnight ago, but she should have been asked here—on an off-day, when no one else was coming. She never would have finished talking of it as long as she lived. But she bit off her own head. I'm sure her mouth looked literally big enough to do it. As for your friend Miss Bryden, she really shall come to you some time when we're not too busy. It ought to make her worth ten pounds a year more salary to the Smith woman. However, to return to Peckham; you shall go this morning, as it's too dark and rainy for your new photographs to come out well, if you kept your appointment; the artificial light's so horrid. But perhaps you wouldn't mind driving down alone in the brougham, leaving me first at Madame Escourt's. I should feel twice the woman I do now after an hour of her electric massage."

All the naughty vanity which had been growing up in me during the past few magical weeks took fire at the thought of appearing at Happiholme *à la princesse*. I well-nigh forgot the importance of my errand there, in thinking of the impression I should make, and I ran eagerly upstairs to get ready the instant that Lady Sophie had risen from the table.

We had breakfasted in dainty muslin dressing-

gowns, as no eyes but those of the servants would behold us, and a particularly late night entitled us to self-indulgence; but I was childishly fastidious in the matter of making my toilette for Peckham.

Finally I selected a smart little tailor frock of blue cloth, with a toque to match, such as no eye in Cousin Sarah East's street had ever looked upon. I should have liked an elaborate foulard; but the rain raised limitations, and since my transplantation I had begun to study appropriateness as never before.

When I was ready, I glanced at my mirrored reflection, and smiled to think how different was this girl from the one who had driven forth from Happiholme Villa a month ago.

Lady Sophie had insisted from the first on my accepting an allowance of pin-money, despite the constant flow of presents which never ran dry, therefore I was never quite penniless; and now, when I had dropped her in Bond Street, I consulted the contents of my blue monogrammed purse.

I was the proud possessor of one pound and several odd shillings, part of which sum I determined to spend upon gifts for the three juvenile Easts. I stopped the brougham at a toy-shop, again at a confectioner's, and finally went on my way with the articles which I remembered hearing the children say they would prefer to all others, reposing on the seat beside me. I felt rich, happy, fortunate; I could afford to forgive and forget, and my heart was soft even toward her who had persecuted me of old.

How strange it was to see again the dull gray

streets, once so familiar! Though five weeks ago they had walled in my existence, Mayfair and Belgravia appeared now far more homelike.

I glanced at the little enamelled watch which had been a present from Lady Sophie, and discovered that the Easts would be about assembling for their mid-day meal by the time I could reach the house. But I was not sorry for this, as they were the more sure to be at home. My calculations told me also that Mr. East was likely to have returned from his travels, and be at rest for a few days in the bosom of his family. I was safe now from his furtive impertinences, therefore I was pleased that my audience should be increased by one.

The brougham turned into the ugly street, which the coachman had found only through haughty inquiries, and drew up before the house. Down sprang the groom, opened the gate, ascended the steps—"ran up" would be inadequate to express William at his best—and made use of the knocker with dignified insistence. Since he must come to such a place, let it be over quickly.

Matty, the maid-of-all-work, answered the summons, capless, smudged, with samples of the week's menu on her apron. At sight of groom and brougham she gasped, strove in vain for one crucial moment to collect her scattered senses, collapsed utterly, and fell back upon Mr. East, who had shuffled (in dressing-gown and slippers) to the rescue.

Oh, yes, Mrs. East was at home; and the door of the brougham was thrown open for me by the liveried

one with a flourish. One might almost have thought that he appreciated the humour of the situation, and meant to play his part in it for all that it was worth.

"How do you do, Mr. East?" I inquired on the threshold, extending a perfectly gloved hand.

I was conscious that a faint aroma of violets, an indescribable atmosphere of daintiness, breathed from me, counteracting the frank declaration of fried steak and onions in the passage. I rustled silkenly as I moved; I was a being from a different world; yet, as I looked round, the house seemed haunted by ghosts of myself—shabby ghosts, with falling hair, carrying the squalling baby; cooking ghosts, taking Matty's place on her day out; crying ghosts, nagged into tears by Mrs. East's ill-temper.

The image of her which my mind called up only preceded the reality, for she appeared at the top of the basement stairs, puzzled, perspiring, ready to be wrathful. But the sharp words were strangled at birth.

"How do you do?" I repeated to her. "Oh, don't shut the door, if you please. William is just bringing up a few little presents I have for the children."

As I spoke, William reappeared, and with condescension delivered my parcels into Mr. East's nervous hands. The front-door closed; we walked towards the dining-room, the lady of the house being understood to murmur something indistinct, which sounded like "Well, I never!"

Within were the children, the baby tied into a high-chair at the table, though the mid-day dinner had not

yet ceased to frizzle on the kitchen range. I bestowed a soldier cap, sword, epaulettes, and belt upon Jimmy, who forthwith went into spasms of delight; a French doll was dealt out to the more conservative Emmy, who watched her mother for a clue to behaviour; a woolly sheep that said "Baa" was pressed upon the baby; and a box of sweets was laid on the shrine of all three.

"I haven't come to stop long," I announced, struggling against the old spell of servitude and habit that would fain have prostrated me even now. "Don't let me keep you from your luncheon"—with a faint emphasis—"I only want to make arrangements for relieving you of some of the luggage I left here, which, of course, you would like to be rid of."

"Well, you do look a toff!" Mr. East ejaculated admiringly. "I say, have you gone on the stage?" (He pronounced it "stayge.")

Cousin Sarah gave vent to a sound which it would be vulgar, but appropriate, to describe as a snort.

"Don't ask questions, Henry. The young lady may consider you indiscreet, having kept her best friends and only relatives in ignorance for so long as to what had become of her."

"I didn't think, from what you said when you sent me away, that you would be very anxious," I returned, quaking as of yore under the glare of the boiled gooseberries.

"I hope that I attend chapel regularly every Sunday," retorted Mrs. East; and no doubt the remark was intended to be relevant. "I know what is due

to my religion, and I have hoped that you might come to no bad end."

"I am very happy, thank you, visiting Lady Sophie de Gretton, at her house in Park Lane," I reassured her. "She invited me the day I went away from here; but you wouldn't let me tell you."

"Wouldn't let you, indeed!" repeated Cousin Sarah. "The ingratitude of some people! You can have your box, I'm sure, with pleasure; you needn't be afraid that anything's been touched, except your everyday frock, which I thought best to give to Matty, with some underclothing that came back from the wash, and a white cotton blouse which has been made over for Jimmy."

"Had I anything beside? But it wasn't the clothes I wanted, thank you. It was mother's escritoire. I'll lock up the drawers, and then Carter Paterson——"

Mr. and Mrs. East looked at each other. Jimmy began to splutter inarticulately, but was instantly suppressed by a box on the ear from his mother.

"It is not convenient for me that you should go up to the room where the escritoire is to-day," said my relative.

Her husband's eyes grew large, and his lips pursed themselves into a whistle; but Henry East knew his position in the family too well to put on commercial-traveller airs of independence at Happiholme.

I was torn by sudden apprehension. Something had happened during this period of my neglect to the one poor souvenir which I had of my mother.

"Will you have the escritoire got ready yourself,

"Your mother will be dreadfully angry with you, and me too, Jimmy," I objected.

"I don't care. It's always something—might as well be one thing as another. Besides, she won't know I'm with you. She'll just think I hooked it when she wasn't lookin', for she was mad with me this mornin' for stickin' up for you, and I wasn't to have had my dinner any how, 'cept a piece of bread. Let me go with you a little way, then I'll jump out and run home."

"I'll tell you what we'll do!" I cried. "We'll have luncheon together somewhere. Just a short lunch, for I shouldn't like to keep the carriage waiting too long."

Jimmy looked ecstatic, and could scarcely speak for joy. When we came to a pastrycook's of respectable appearance—a place I, in common with the little boy, had once regarded as quite a palace of luxury—I rang the electric bell, which informed the coachman that I wished to stop. Jimmy and I got out, and presently were seated at a damp table, which imitated marble, with heaped-up plates of vanilla ice and strawberries before us.

"Now, my dear manny, kindly don't choke yourself to death until you have told me that 'importantest thing,' " I warned my companion.

"It's about your eskertore," carefully pronounced Jimmy, with his mouth too full for utterance. "Ma told you—well, what you used to call a 'tarradiddle,' because it wasn't polite to say 'lie.' The eskertore isn't upstairs in our room any more, at all."

"What's become of it?" I questioned eagerly.

"Well, it's an awful long story, for there's such a lot of other things mixed up in it, you know."

I wished that I did know; but I had to bide Jimmy's time in simulated patience.

"Will you begin at the beginning, then, dear," I suggested, "and tell it that way? I'll try not to interrupt."

Jimmy nodded, and swallowed manfully.

"The beginning was just after you went out of the house that evenin'. My goodness! it seems 'most a year ago, but I s'pose it can't be, eh? Anyhow, ma went tearin' round just like a chicken what's had its head chopped off and ain't quite sure it's dead. She dumped the baby on the bed and ran to the front-room to look outer the window after you. She didn't think at first you'd truly gone. But bimeby she came back, and then she started throwin' your things on the floor. At last she opened the drawers of your eskertore. 'Twasn't locked, though the key was stickin' in it, as it always was. She read some letters that was there in a bundle, and slapped me because I said she was a sneak."

"They were only letters from Anne Bryden and her mother," I laughed bitterly. "I had no one else to write to me, my little champion."

"Anyhow, she tore 'em up and stamped on 'em. Then she stood lookin' at the desk in a queer sort of way, with her eyes snappin'. 'I won't have the thing here, takin' up house room for nothin',' says she. (Jimmy was a born mimic.) 'What I'll do is to sell

it to Sam Moss, the old furniture dealer, round the corner.'"

I had nearly cried in wrath; but I remembered my promise not to interrupt.

"She said first I was to run over to his shop, and ask him to come and look at it straight off. But then she changed her mind, and thought she'd go herself, because she wanted to see if he had anything she'd like to change it for. She put on her hat, and never knew Emmy and me had come along, till we was all at the shop. You know how late old Moss keeps open nights, but he'd have been shut up in ten minutes. Ma told him what she wanted, and when she'd described the eskertore, Moss said it wouldn't be much good to him; he hardly ever got asked for that sort of desk; but to please a neighbour she might have a big standing-lamp with a torn red shade that was in a corner of the shop; that is, if the eskertore was as good as she said it was when he saw it.

"Ma was awful pleased about the lamp, for she'd always wanted one, and she made Sam Moss go home with her that minute, while his wife looked after the shop. Em and me went up in our room when ma took Moss there to see the desk, and his eyes kind of lit up, though I could tell he didn't want ma to know he was pleased. He'd said before he couldn't send for the thing that night, but he changed round, and told her he'd have it fetched at once. The boy who came with the hand-cart should bring the lamp at the same time.

"When he went I ran after, and told him he'd be

a bad man if he took that eskertore, 'cause it was yours, and not ma's to sell. But he shrugged up his fat shoulders, and grinned with his yellow teeth, and said that was ma's business, not his or mine, and little boys should be seen and not heard. What an old stupid not to know that's for girls, not boys! Anyhow, he had the desk fetched away, though I made a row, and got sent to bed without my supper. I tell you, I cried 'cause it was the first time I could ever remember when you hadn't let me say my prayers by your knee, and tucked me in afterwards, and kissed me good-night. But ma never knew that I so much as snivelled."

"Dear old loyal Jim!" I exclaimed. "Thank you for telling me all this; for now the only thing I have to do is to go to Moss's and buy back the escritoire. I'm sure the lady I'm visiting will do that for me; and, as the man only bought it to please your mother, he can't charge so very much."

"I bet that was a 'tarradiddle,' too! But you haven't heard all my story yet, Con; the queer part's to come. It began next morning. I was wheeling baby in the pram up and down in front of the door, while ma did some of the work that used to be yours (and pretty sick she was about it, too), when an old gentleman drove up in a hansom. He didn't seem quite sure of the house at first, but looked all round, and when he saw me he asked if I knew a young lady named Brand. I said I did, that you were my cousin, though my mother didn't like you called so, and that you'd gone away the night before. Where had you gone? said he, and gave me a shillin'. I didn't know,

said I, and put the shillin' in my pocket. Then he inquired if my mother was in. He wouldn't give any name, but said he had 'portant business, and I took him in the parlour. Ma dressed herself before she came down, so I talked to the man, and he asked me a lot of questions, mostly about you. When ma opened the door, I made as if I was going out, but while she said 'How de do?' and neither of 'em was lookin', I just slipped under the table—the one with the long red cloth—and I heard everything."

"What was the gentleman like?" I inquired.

"Pretty old, with nice clothes, and a tall, shiny hat, and gold watch-chain. Oh, he'd got spectacles with gold rims, too!—dark sort of spectacles, that wouldn't let you see his eyes very well. And side-whiskers gray like his hair."

"Mr. Wynnstay!" I muttered below my breath.

And my interest in Jimmy's narrative increased.

"What's a solicitor?" suddenly queried the little boy. "Oh, only a lawyer! Well, that's what the old gentleman was. He told ma, and said that he was looking for someone named Brand, because there might be—might be 'something to her 'vantage.' Ma pricked up her ears, and began to talk about how much she'd done for you ever since your mother died; and if there was any money coming to you, she ought to have some of it. The old gentleman was very polite, and said he thought so, too. It all depended on whether you had papers to prove what 'branch of the fam'ly' you came down from, or something like that—only fam'lies don't grow on branches, do they?

"He asked ma if you had a lot of old letters and fam'ly papers, and she shook her head; she was sure you hadn't anything of the kind, or she'd have known about it long ago. Your mother, when she was alive, was always hintin' about great things that might be comin' to you in the future; but ma hadn't believed a word of it. Your mother never had a penny to bless herself with after she came back from Australia, or America, or somewhere, a widow with one little girl, and her nice looks and her health all gone.

"Perhaps ma was mistaken, the old gentleman said, so pleasant and soft. Maybe you'd had papers put away in some box or piece of furniture. Wasn't there anything of that kind you'd taken with you or left behind at our house? There was a eskertore, ma told him; but she'd searched every drawer when you'd gone, and there was nothing except a few silly letters from a girl you knew, called Bryden.

"The old gentleman kept playin' with his hat; I could see him from under the tablecloth, but once in a while he'd look up through the glasses awful sharp. He looked up like that when ma spoke about the eskertore. He asked if ma'd let him see it, because, he said, there might be some crest (whatever that is), or other sort of mark, which would tell him whether you belonged to the right family, and might come in for a little money bimeby.

"Ma hummed and hawed, feelin' pretty queer to think she'd sold your desk, I bet; but she wouldn't tell what she'd done. It was yours, she said, and she didn't know if she ought to show it without your

consent. But didn't she just jump when he cried out he'd give five pounds for only a look at the thing. That old lamp she'd got couldn't have cost more 'n a pound when 'twas new, so it served her jolly well right! I wondered whatever she would be up to next; but she sat still, thinkin'; and then, says she, if he'd wait a few minutes, she'd try and arrange for him to see the eskertore.

"Then I knew what she meant to do: she was goin' round to Sam Moss's to buy the desk back. She went out of the room, and bimeby I heard the front-door shut, awful sly. The man might have seen ma slip past if he'd looked out of the window, but he didn't; he just walked up and down, with his hands behind his back, and once in a while he said something to himself that I couldn't hear, only just the word 'luck.'

"Ma was gone a long time, and I got thinking to myself, maybe Moss wouldn't let her have the desk back, and she'd be ashamed to tell she'd sold it, and then the old gentleman couldn't find out what he wanted; so you'd never get the money he said might be coming to you if you was the right branch. That made me wild, so thinks I to myself, 'Better take the last chance you'll have before ma comes back'; and out I crawls from under the table.

"The man looked kind of queer at first, and scowled through his big spectacles, but when he'd heard what I had to say he was glad and thanked me. Before I'd speak out I made him promise he wouldn't let ma know I'd been under the table or told him anything;

and I'd hardly finished when I spied her comin' in the gate as I peered through the window. With that I scooted into the passage before she could get to the door.

"Her face was cross enough to stop a clock, but she didn't speak a word to me, and I didn't know what she'd told the old gentleman. But I was just goin' to know, so I went out into the street and hung round where nobody could spy me from the house, though I could see anyone who passed through the gate.

"I hadn't been many minutes when the man came out. He'd sent away his cab when he heard ma was at home, so he had to get another, and while he was walkin' slowly along I said, 'Hullo, sir!' and made him jump. 'Oh, I was lookin' for you, little chap,' says he. 'I'll give yer another bob if you'll take me round to that shop where the desk was sold.' 'Right you are,' says I. And I asked him if ma'd told about sellin' it. 'No, she had'nt,' said he.

"She made up a story about consultin' a friend of hers, and they'd both come to the 'clusion she hadn't ought to show your property to a stranger without writin' to you. So now he wanted to see the furniture man. I was pretty sure then somethin' was wrong, though I didn't know what. But we found out in a minute at Moss's. Whatever do you think had happened, Con?"

"The escritoire was broken, or burned, or——"

"No. Somebody'd been in already and bought it, only 'bout two hours before. That was why ma'd had to make up her—tarradiddle, to save herself from

lookin' a fool. My goodness, you'd ought to have seen the old gentleman's face! He got quite white, and when he began to ask questions he stammered and stuttered before he could speak straight. 'Was it a dealer bought the desk?' he wanted to know. 'No, 'twas a private gent,' said Sam Moss—somebody he'd never seen before.

"A 'gent'—that's what Moss called it—came sauntering along, looked in the shop window, asked the price of some things, and then set eyes on the eskertore. 'How much was that?' says he. 'Twenty pounds,' says Moss. (Oh, my aunt, mustn't ma have been sick if he let that out to her!) And like a shot the gent paid the money. Moss would have sent the desk, he told us, but the gent got a growler, and took it away with him. That's everything Moss knew.

"My old man thought for a while, and calmed down a bit; then he gave Moss some money, quite a lot it looked, and told him to advertize for the cabman who drove the gent and the eskertore. 'Here's my card,' says he, "and if you hear, you can let me know. But the job's for you to work. I want the desk, but I'm a busy man, and I haven't time to bother, nor I don't care to appear; it's better for a man of business. If you can get that eskertore back for me, as I've taken such a fancy to have it, you can pay up to a hundred and fifty pounds, and I'll give you thirty more for yourself.'

"Moss promised to do what he could, and said he'd leave 'no stone unturned,' or somethin' like that. Then my old gentleman was goin' away, and would have for-

got all about me and the bob I was to have if I hadn't reminded him. I don't b'lieve he was very glad to see me again, but he gave me the money, and jumped into a cab that was passin' slowly by. That's all the story, Con, but I thought you'd like to know. And so, you see, it's no good sendin' Carter Pat'son to our house."

"No, it's no good," I echoed reflectively. "Thank you, Jimmy, a hundred times, for looking after my interests so well. You're a dear boy, and some time, maybe, I can do something for you to make up."

"If you ever get a house of your own, p'raps you'll have me to visit you," he suggested.

"Indeed I will. I should like to have you to stop all the time, for you and I have been good pals, haven't we, Jimmy? If I wrote to you once in a while, I wonder if your mother would let you have the letters?"

"Not she. She'd make curl-papers of 'em for her front hair, like as not. Anyhow, I shouldn't see 'em. But if I wanted to let you know anything, I could nick a stamp and some paper, and I could print you a letter, though I can't write so very well yet. You just tell me where you live, and I'll say it over and over to myself, till I know it by heart and can't forget."

I told him the street and the number, gave him money to ride home in a tram—our pastrycook was not far from the street honoured by Happiholme Villa—and five minutes later I was rolling smoothly away in the brougham towards Park Lane.

My brain buzzed with conflicting thoughts. I deeply regretted having lost the escritoire, but my distress was well-nigh overshadowed by the amazement I felt at the curious train of circumstances which complicated my loss.

"I am the girl about whom Lady Dunbar was speaking that night," I exclaimed, half aloud. "It must be so. The concidence would be too extraordinary otherwise, as everything has now turned out. And it was Mr. Wynnstay who was with her, behind the curtain. I don't wonder so much that I didn't recognise his voice, for he spoke in such a low, bass grumble, as if he could not quite depend upon her assurance about the locked door. But I did think, even then, that the voice sounded familiar. Let me see—if I can —how does it all work together? What does it all mean?"

CHAPTER XV

LINKS IN A CHAIN

I SENT my mind back to collect each trifling detail that had formed a link in the chain of Fate since the day when I had received my astonishing invitation from Lady Sophie de Gretton in the Park. And then, when I had them all before me, I tried to join them together in something like proper sequence. But I was very young, and I had had no previous experience as an amateur detective.

If I had not been mistaken, if Mr. Wynnstay had really attempted to drug me at Holland Park Mansions that memorable night, it seemed certain either that he had wished to do me some serious harm, or else that he had intended to search my pockets for papers which he was desperately anxious to discover. These were the only reasons for such a course that occurred to me.

Then I found, in trying to recall them one by one, that I could not accurately remember the words exchanged by Lady Dunbar and her companion behind the curtain. I had not charged my mind with them as I might had I believed at the time that their purport could intimately concern me, and I had now only the impression left that Lady Dunbar had resented the power which the owner of a certain escritoire might

exert over her. She had consulted Mr. Wynnstay confidentially, and he had been of the opinion that much depended on papers in the aforesaid person's possession, that person being mentioned by him as "the girl," by Lady Dunbar as "the creature."

Now, I assuredly was a girl, but to my idea of myself the description "creature" was far from applicable. I had never harmed Lady Dunbar, and could not see how I should be able to do so even if I would. Her daughter disliked me, I felt instinctively, though she had sought my society with some assiduity during the few weeks of our acquaintance. But that was different. Lady Sophie's scarcely-veiled hints had set me blushing for the motive which might inspire antagonism in Miss Dunbar's heart.

Why, I knew not, but Mr. Wynnstay and Lady Dunbar apparently had some common interest in my affairs. Both had given evidence of wishing to fight against me rather than for me, if I could trust to my poor deductions; yet Mr. Wynnstay, supposing it were he, had gone to Happiholme Villa announcing that he had information which "might be to my advantage."

The more I thought, the more tangled grew the coil in my brain; yet I did begin to wonder if I were going to prove rather an important young person, after all. At any rate, it seemed clear that Mr. Wynnstay and Lady Dunbar believed themselves possessed of a knowledge of my past. It might be that I was not the girl they supposed me to be, for, as Jimmy had said, perhaps I didn't belong to the "right branch of the family."

But they were taking something for granted, I thought, and I would do the same. Possibly, if I proved to be of significance in their lives, I might come into money which Lady Dunbar considered that she and her daughter ought to inherit. Such things did happen sometimes, and my dear mother had always been reserved, even with me, so that I knew next to nothing of my antecedents.

Lady Dunbar had admitted that I resembled someone she had formerly known, and though I could not prove that her story about her charitable visit to Peckham was a fabrication to cover her real motive, I was surer than ever now that she had deliberately followed me home.

The telegram which I had seen her writing, it suddenly struck me, had probably been sent to Mr. Wynnstay. Perhaps he had not been at home when it arrived; for much later, when I had first seen him, on the point of leaving Holland Park Mansions, I now remembered that he had been crushing something which looked like a telegram in his hand.

If this had been a message concerning me, how extraordinary a coincidence it must have seemed to him at that moment that I should walk almost into his arms! The resemblance which had impressed Lady Dunbar at first sight must have been evident to Mr. Wynnstay as well, or he would not have immediately taken measures for detaining me—measures which, at the beginning of the scene between us, I had attributed to a stranger's kindness of heart.

I now fancied that, in obedience to the telegram, the

man had gone to Happiholme Villa at the earliest practicable hour on the following morning. He had already seen me, and been aware, therefore, of my absence the night before, though he had not necessarily known that it would be permanent.

He had doubtless obtained at the house in Peckham a good deal of information regarding me, which Jimmy, with the best intentions in the world, had neglected to dilate upon in his narrative; he had been willing to pay the sum of five pounds merely to obtain a glimpse of the escritoire, and nearly two hundred to possess it.

Question myself as I might, I could not find a reason substantial enough to explain such extravagant eagerness. I had never supposed that the poor little piece of furniture, which I treasured in memory of my mother, was of much intrinsic value. It was antique, I knew, but I was meagerly instructed in such matters. I thought I had heard mother say that the escritoire, which had been hers since I could remember, was Chippendale; but Chippendale meant little more to my ignorance than bamboo; and, besides, the desk showed the wear and tear of life at Happiholme.

The dog's teeth, the baby's drumsticks, Emmy's pencils, and Jimmy's penknife, had all left their traces upon it from time to time, to say nothing of an ink-bottle which an unexpected tap on my elbow had once caused me to upset. Notwithstanding these things a presumably disinterested "private gent" had considered the thing worth twenty pounds and a four-wheeled cab, while Mr. Wynnstay had turned pale over its loss.

No doubt the latter had supposed that I kept im-

portant papers locked away in it, refusing to credit Mrs. East's perfectly true statement that every drawer was empty, save for Anne's letters. His explanation that the desk itself was to be taken as proof of my identity seemed too far fetched, and I did not credit it.

I blushed a little as I told myself that Mr. Wynnstay had in all probability retailed what he had heard of me to Lady Dunbar and "Diana," as the younger woman had invited me to call her. Whatever else they might or might not know of me, they were probably aware that, instead of being the high-born young orphan heiress from the country, whom Lady Sophie de Gretton had taken under her wing for the season because of an old friendship, I was only a little insignificance plucked by the hand of eccentric charity from nursery-governessing in the wilds of Peckham.

My evasions of Lady Dunbar's rather pointed questions regarding the frequency of my visits to that neighbourhood had availed nothing. Doubtless, when Lady Dunbar asked them she was already acquainted with the truth from that mysterious person, Mr. Wynnstay. How she and Diana, the only enemies I had made in the new world (which was not to be all sunshine for me), must laugh when they heard the stories Lady Sophie had carefully set afloat concerning my past!

They might tell what they knew (and this reflection brought another blush), putting me to shame among my smart acquaintances. But, on the whole, I hardly fancied that they would proceed to this ex-

treme without sharp provocation. If it were Lady Dunbar's *mètier* to deny having followed me to Peckham, to disavow all personal interest in me and my antecedents (lest I should be put on the track of rights now unknown to me, and strive to claim them), she would not wish to admit a knowledge of what my life had been before I burst upon society as "one of Lady Sophie's débutantes."

I ought not to have cared who knew the story of my perfectly respectable, blankly monotonous years at Peckham. I had earned my living honestly and by hard work, which was more than could be said of many among my new friends. But, though I had not to repent having circulated false reports concerning myself, my growing vanity had led me to accept without protest Lady Sophie's version of my history; and now I owned to my conscience that I would be mortified if she were contradicted, and the bald truth ruthlessly bruited about.

The only real decision which I had arrived at by the time I reached Park Lane was to tell my patroness Jimmy's story, and let her sharp wits supplement my inexperienced efforts at deduction.

I had started out at twelve o'clock, and it was two when I returned. Lady Sophie was ready for luncheon, and pronounced herself starved; but my part as narrator, and hers as listener, after all, prevented our doing justice to the dainty odds and ends with which her cook had studied our feminine appetites.

Eventually, however, though her opinions largely coincided with mine, they proved disappointing to my

expectations, for she had no brilliant light to throw on the matter.

The principal question appeared to be: Had I evidence to show who I was, or who my father's people had been, as the other side, judging from the Easts, did not seem particularly promising. If I had proofs, it might be worth while to spend a little money in having the affair sifted, and find out whether I could lay claim to the advantages of which the Dunbars or others would fain deprive me. Lady Sophie had read of such things; there were always advertisements in papers requesting missing heirs to come forward; and who could tell but I might come into some nice little legacy?

I had no such proofs, no family papers whatever? Then, beyond consulting her solicitor, Lady Sophie did not see what steps we could possibly take.

"It—it was nothing like this that made you first think of asking me to come to you?" I stammered at last.

The colour rose to her handsome face.

"No, it was nothing like that," she echoed with reserve.

Next day Lady Sophie did repeat my tale to her solicitor, a delightful old person in a Gladstonian collar, who had transacted legal business for her late husband and her late husband's father. I was not present at the interview; but my benefactress assured me that she had been most clear, most concise, and had not forgotten a single point.

Yet the upshot of the matter was that Mr. Wal-

lace had smiled, as he might smile indulgence at a precocious child. He knew Mr. Wynnstay by reputation, and had every reason for believing him to be, professionally and privately, above reproach. He was unable to see that there was anything in the case (the excellent man would persist in regarding me as a "case"), and advised Lady Sophie not to take measures which she was sure to regret.

Mr. Wynnstay was an honourable and clever solicitor, who might be trusted to let Miss Brand know, in good time, if there were any chance of her inheriting property, whether or no clients of his had endeavoured to prejudice his mind, a supposition which Mr. Wallace considered extremely wild, excessively improbable.

"I dare say, if we knew the whole truth of the matter(all you overheard, and all that your little cousin told you) the explanation would be so simple that you would laugh at your own suspicions," declared Lady Sophie, fresh from her talk with her old adviser. If you are determined to be the heroine of a romance, my child, turn your eyes away from this muddle to a love-story. I assure you it will be far more repaying."

This shut me up within myself again, as a mention of "love" from her lips invariably did, through my vague, half-admitted fear that she would plunge into personalities. I resigned my mind to the loss of the escritoire, and came near to forgetting my many causes of bewilderment in preparations for Henley.

Lady Sophie and I had been asked for the three

days of the regatta on board a giant house-boat which belonged to Captain Weyland's married brother, Lord Forth. Lady Dunbar and Diana were invited also; and Sir George Seaforth had told me that he had accepted because we were going.

Life on the *Idle Hour* was a revelation to me. Lady Sophie had provided me with some pretty dresses, and I was petted and flattered, till it became a marvel that my head was not completely turned. Perhaps this would have happened if it had not been for Sir George Seaforth.

CHAPTER XVI

SESAME AND LILIES

It was not that Sir George did not conspire with the rest for the overthrow of my common-sense, but, when he was with me, what the others did or said mattered little. And, somehow, no look or word of admiration from this one man ever appealed to my vanity.

I was apt to take it for granted that most men meant what they said, if they assured me that I was the only girl worth talking to, worth gazing at, on earth; and when they neglected other women for the sake of absorbing as much of my society as I would grant, I was willing to believe that they did it solely for the desire to be with me.

But when George Seaforth schemed to get me away from the crowd into quiet corners, I made myself miserable with the fear that he only did so because he wanted to make someone else—Diana, perhaps—jealous. Or I was tormented with the thought that he might merely enjoy a flirtation with a girl who had achieved the reputation of a beauty.

Again, if I had succeeded in persuading myself that so abominable a motive had never entered Sir George Seaforth's head, I flung my spirit once more into the

depths with the conviction that his desire was to save me from neglect. I fancied the few sweet compliments which he sometimes paid me, in words as well as deeds, were but the utterances of habit, the things which men of the world, in society, considered due to every tolerably good-looking woman.

Whenever we parted (no matter how happy I had been while we were together), I was invariably despondent, overwhelmed with useless regrets for smart repartees I might have made, and had not; hating myself because I had been so dull, so stupid, so altogether unamusing.

I recalled with pangs of jealous misery Diana Dunbar's wit, when she had flashed a briliant *mot* into the midst of our conversation; how much more alluring, fascinating, and altogether graceful her ways were than mine; and how impossible it seemed that Sir George should not prefer a radiant orchid to a commonplace, wayside flower like Consuelo Brand.

With other men I was easy and natural enough. I did not struggle to "make conversation," because it came without effort. If I felt like talking, I talked; if not, I considered that my satellites should be grateful for my silence. It seemed an irony of fate that in the presence of the one man I really wished to please I should be afflicted with dumbness, clumsiness, mental and physical. I wonder now, in reviewing these poignant sensations of mine, whether my sister women have not experienced the same.

Still, despite the pain I suffered, or perhaps partly because of it, I was happy. It was something to be

with him, to know that I held his thoughts for the moment, even if he did not greatly care. With the end of the season, perhaps, we might say good-bye; his world would no longer be my world, but after that —the deluge. And I tried to live in each passing day. I happened to mention my fondness for water-lilies. Instantly I saw Sir George—who had been told off to Diana Dunbar as dinner-companion—look up with a sudden alertness. And perhaps Diana saw it, too, for she promptly engaged him in what appeared to be a most absorbing conversation.

But an hour later he had not forgotten. When we were up on deck among the flowers, with the dazzle and darkness of a Henley night round us, he asked if I "liked my lilies to come to me, or if I preferred to go to them."

"I'd like to go to them, of all things," I answered eagerly.

"Are you up to an early start, and would Lady Sophie mind my taking you?"

I assured him that I thought, in so worthy a cause, she might be persuaded.

"Well, then, what do you say to seven to-morrow morning? I'll have a canoe ready, and we'll be back in time for breakfast with a cargo of lilies."

I could hardly sleep that night, for fear I should wake too late, and find I had missed so precious an hour. I wondered if Sir George's mind were also filled with thoughts of to-morrow, or if he reposed in calm oblivion of me and my lilies.

I was ready, in the end, half an hour too early; but

lest he should think I cared too much, I would not go out until five minutes after the time, when I appeared with an assumed air of hurry.

I had supposed that no one else would be visible so soon, but there, dressed in white muslin, and daintily feeding a swan, stood Diana Dunbar. I came at the wrong moment, as one usually does on such occasions, for she was talking to Sir George, who was ready and waiting with a little Canadian canoe.

"I think you are very selfish to be going off alone on such a heavenly morning," she said, with a pretty pettishness, of which she had a special art. "You know I'm always up with the sun on a house-boat. Be a good chum, Georgie, just as you used, and take me with you."

It was at this instant that I must needs appear; and I was pink for her, from chin to forehead. I would have given anything not to have been a witness of her discomfiture. She turned at the crisp rustle of me, in my pale blue linen; and the red which sprang to her face was like an angry reflection from mine.

"O, I think you might have told me you weren't going alone, George," she exclaimed crossly.

"I would, if you had given me time," he returned. "Of course, I knew you were only chaffing, and hadn't the slightest desire to leave your beloved swans, even if Miss Brand——"

"Miss Brand would like Miss Dunbar to have 'first turn,' as the children say," I broke in as pleasantly as I knew how, in the hope of relieving a strained situa-

tion. "I'm afraid I hinted to Sir George about the water-lilies, so that he could hardly help himself——"

"Oh, you are going out for lilies, are you?" she echoed stiffly. "He took me for lilies last year."

Her words brought the blood to my cheeks again, and Sir George drew his eyebrows together.

"I suppose I did if you say so," he replied. "And I will again this year with the greatest pleasure, whenever you will let me, except this morning, when Miss Brand is going with me. Now I really think that we had better start, or we shall be late for breakfast."

"Start by all means; I am not keeping you," retorted Diana. "For a country girl, my dear little Consuelo, you are developing into quite a modern, emancipated young lady. Pretty well, I call it, for a débutante of a month or so old."

"What do you mean?" I questioned, as I settled myself on the cushions of the canoe.

If the lace frills of my petticoat had not chosen to catch upon some invisible projection on the steps from the house-boat. I might not have heard her answer, as Sir George seemed rather anxious to be off. But she spoke quickly during the short process of disentanglement.

"I mean that duets in canoes before breakfast are rather advanced, aren't they? Don't look so angry, George; I'm speaking entirely for Consuelo's good. I don't know that I'm any older than she is, but this is my second season, and I haven't lived in Devonshire, or—or in Peckham, or anywhere else in the provinces, all my life. I only want to say in the most friendly

way that she must really be careful if she doesn't want people to talk. There's quite gossip enough about her already."

"That's all nonsense, and you know it, Diana," Sir George exclaimed, looking at her as I should not have liked him to look at me. "You have got out on the wrong side of your bed this morning, that is all."

"You are pleased to be both rude and vulgar, my dear friend," she flung at him, her eyes flashing.

Sir George began to paddle away, but I could not resist the exchange of another shot.

"Any way, you said you went after lilies last year," I reminded her.

"That was different. I thought you knew that George and I were very old friends."

She turned her back to me and bestowed her ruffled attention once more upon the impatient swans. But whether she or I had come off victor in the final encounter I was not certain. I only knew that I was very uncomfortable, and that the expedition to which I had so eagerly looked forward bade fair to be spoiled.

"It wasn't really horrid of me to come?" I inquired forlornly.

"Of course not," Sir George asseverated. "Do you think I would have asked you if it were not all right, and Lady Sophie hadn't consented? Diana's in a temper this morning, and she visited it on us because we were the only targets at hand. Don't think any more about her; do be happy, and do smile on me or I shall want to commit suicide. You were an angel to come with me, and I haven't slept all night for thinking how

glorious it would be to have you to myself for a whole hour. I can't have Diana Dunbar ruining it now."

Oh, if he only meant it, and didn't say it just to console me, how well I should be repaid for my sleepless hours!

The lilies grew like a carpet over the water, on a miniature lake in the grounds of a certain Mr. Somebody or Other, who was a friend of Sir George's, and encouraged him to trespass. We had reached the place in twenty minutes, my companion carrying the canoe across the strip of meadow which separated pond from river, and floating it again among the dark, nestling lily-pads.

We pushed ourselves about, gathering the great white, gold-eyed stars that shone up from the green dusk; and once, as we both went forward to pluck the same luscious bud, our fingers touched. A curious little thrill ran up my hand, tingling along my arm, and never ceasing till it reached my heart.

I did not mean to look up, but I could not help it; magnet-like, something irresistible seemed to draw my eyes, and they met his. There was a light in them that I had never seen, not in the eyes of man or woman, nor upon sea or land.

"Consuelo," he said, and his fingers closed down on mine as we both held the lily that lifted its fair head to us from the water.

So strong his hand was, and firm, that I seemed to feel its grasp through my body's fingers, touching those of my spirit as if the flesh had been only a glove over the soul.

"There's something I must confess to you," he said, in a low voice; "and then—there's a question I have to ask; a question I want to ask, and to have answered in one way, more than I ever wanted anything else in the world."

"Hullo, good people! hope you haven't got all the lilies!" exclaimed Captain Weyland's voice.

We looked up with a start, and our hands fell guiltily apart. On the shore of the little lake stood the young Guardsman immaculate in flannels, and by his side Diana Dunbar.

"We haven't got all, but we have all we want, and we are ready to go," said Sir George, with a sudden change of manner.

"Then we must go, too, for I have been sent to chaperon you," announced Diana.

Sir George bit his lip.

"You are too good," he returned dryly. "I wonder who was thoughtful enough for our comfort to give you both so much trouble."

"Oh, I didn't mind," responded Diana, avoiding his question. "And Jerry is always so good-natured. Do stop for a few minutes and give us time to gather some lilies. You seem to have forgotten that other people besides Miss Brand can be fond of them."

We did stop. I think that we even continued plucking the white, waxy blossoms which had been our lodestars; but I am not quite sure of anything that happened after the interruption. My heart was singing a new song, and I scarcely heard outside sounds.

At first I had been bitterly sorry—bitterly resentful that Sir George's words should have been cut short, especially by the girl who hated me while she purred her "Consuelos"; that would have seemed, if I had been superstitious, like an ill omen. But I was too happy to be superstitious, and when I could think again I was almost glad that Sir George had not finished what I dared believe he had meant to say.

I had heard enough to be in the seventh heaven, for I was almost sure that, despite my past uncertainties and self-inflicted torments, the "thing which he wanted more than he had ever wanted anything before" was my love. I could wait to hear the rest, and there was a strange joy in feeling that an experience which can come to most women but once (the offer of his heart and life from the one man beside whom the rest are shadows) was twice to be mine.

I could dwell upon this morning among the lilies, until the right moment should come for Sir George to complete what he had begun. To be sure, there was a sharp element of suspense, for supposing, after all, he had not meant what I thought; or if he had, supposing he changed his mind, thankful that he had not gone too far to draw back?

I was much too deep in love not to dwell upon these doubts and make the most of them. But I was of an adventurous spirit; and that very element of suspense, of danger, had always possessed a certain charm for me. Besides, without vanity, I had a right to be almost sure of him, after that unforgettable look in

his eyes; and my spirit waited in the spell of a dream for what should come next.

He and I could not be quite as we had been before that broken moment when our hands and eyes had met; neither could we have the peaceful feeling of mutual understanding hidden from all the rest of the world, which engaged people enjoy before their secret has become the common property of their friends.

I tried to speak, to look as usual, but it did not seem to me that Sir George cared to exert himself for conventionalities; his manner gave me a sly, delicious little hope that he had passed beyond that, and would not even appear to go back.

Diana and Captain Weyland kept close to us, talking incessantly, and I knew, with the instinct which is sharpened by love, that her intention was to prevent the exchange of a word between us which all the world might not have heard. She had been afraid that Sir George had a special motive for taking me out to the lake of the lilies, and had schemed from the first to circumvent him.

I was ready to believe now the hints Lady Sophie had let drop, that Diana Dunbar would like to be Lady Seaforth. She had been very popular, without doubt had received many offers; but she had held herself free through two successful seasons. Lady Sophie had said that she guessed the reason why; but she had added that so far as Sir George was concerned, there had never been more than the merest flirtation.

We went back to the *Idle Hour,* all four together,

Diana apparently in high spirits, though her lips were tight and her eyes hard even while she smiled.

"Give me ten minutes some time to-day, for Heaven's sake," Sir George managed to whisper, as he helped me at the steps.

Before I could answer, Lady Forth came out, laughing, and claiming tribute of our lilies. They were just what she wanted for table decoration, she declared; it was so nice of us to take so much trouble, all for her.

Somehow, the chance to give those ten minutes which Sir George had asked for did not come. Exactly how it happened—whether by design or accident—one could hardly have said; but we were always interrupted if we drifted near each other. Sometimes it was Captain Weyland, Diana's slave, sometimes Lady Dunbar, but oftenest Diana herself, intervened.

Henley, on a house-boat, with a big and merry party of people who know each other well, is not the most convenient place for a *tête-á-tête,* no matter what the magazine story-tellers may say, when they have a topical "society tale" to grind out for the first week of July.

Lord and Lady Forth had hosts of friends, none of whom were absent from the regatta; and besides the house-boat party, there was generally a crowd of outsiders on board, lunching or chatting under the pink awning, and pretending to watch the races.

Late bedtime came that night, and Sir George and I had not had one minute together, much less ten; and though I did no fail to stab myself with the suggestion that perhaps he had not cared very much after

all, I could not honestly believe that it had been his fault.

A hundred times I went over the words that he had said, but it was only just as I was sinking into sleep at last that I started awake with the remembrance of some which, if not forgotten, had not till now held a separate, distinct significance in my mind.

What had he meant by the preface that there was "something he must confess?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE MASKED SINGERS

It was our third night at Henley, and nothing had happened. That is, much had happened by way of entertainment, but, selfishly speaking, nothing that was of intimate importance to me, or perhaps to Sir George Seaforth.

There was a dinner-party on board the *Idle Hour,* but we had dined early on account of the illuminations and the fun of the last evening of the regatta. The late summer twilight still lingered in the sky when the men joined us on deck, and the soft blue dusk was jewelled by the coloured lights that glittered along the line of house-boats, or sparkled up from the small craft that crowded the river like a flock of tropical aquatic birds.

The delicate lap, lap of the water against the side of the boats was drowned by the sound of laughter, the buzz of talking, and the tinkle of banjo and mandolin in the hands of the river minstrels. Here and there a sweet voice rose, carolling some popular air of the moment, or a negro song that floated out with soft melancholy through the falling night; and as the men appeared, a punt occupied by masked minstrels who had proved themselves particularly skilled came

on from a neighbouring house-boat to pause before the *Idle Hour*.

The pair were a man and woman, elaborately dressed in Japanese costume, and masked so that their faces were entirely concealed. The man played a violin, and the woman sang, with so rich a contralto that I listened in dreamy pleasure as they began the Mexican "La Paloma," little dreaming with what a rude shock I was presently to be roused.

So many guests had come on board for dinner to-night that the deck of the *Idle Hour* was almost crowded; but presently I was conscious, though I scarcely looked round, that Sir George had found his way to me, and was standing close behind me. On my other side was Diana. He might have occupied a place beside her, which she had been keeping with some finesse, if he had chosen; but he had ignored the opportunity, and with a just perceptible, petulant movement of her pretty shoulders, Diana let Captain Weyland fill the vacant place.

"Oh, I wish they would give us something else!" I cried, when the musicians had finished.

Diana and Captain Weyland were the only others who applauded with enthusiasm, for Sir George had started from a reverie at my words.

"Do you wish it?" he asked. "Then they shall;" and he clapped his hands with a vigour so contagious that everyone on board turned from their own conversation to the music, which was beginning again.

Not only were our own people ready to listen to the song which should come next, but those on all the

adjacent house-boats and the occupants of the little boats within hearing distance. The fact was that the *Idle Hour* had been the most admired house-boat of the season, and as many of her party were well known in society, anything that happened on her deck at once attracted attention.

I could even hear, sometimes, comments on my own appearance, stage whispers regarding my popularity, or information as to my name and place of residence. But I had become too thoroughly accustomed to that sort of thing by this time to be much disconcerted.

The air which the masked minstrels had selected for their encore was a new one, with a certain impudent swing and lilt about it, as the man played a few bars on his violin before the woman began to sing.

Then she lifted her voice, and it rang out far more clearly than before, each word pronounced with a singular distinctness.:

"Little Miss Nobody climbed up a throne,
Though she hadn't a penny to call her own.
She wore fine feathers and lived on the best,
Oh, trust Cinderella to feather her nest.
The lies that she told made the air quite blue,
So where she came from few people knew.
Who would have thought that, down Peckham way,
She'd taught in a nursery day by day?
But Miss Cinderella kept it all still,
For fear that the tradesmen would send in their bill.
She wanted to pose as an heiress rare,
For smart men won't marry a pauper fair.
She says her prayers, throws her line for a Duke:
She'll get one, too, by hook or by crook—
Or else she'll feel that the game's in vain,
And go back to Peckham to hide her pain.

CHORUS,

Poor Cinderella sits and sighs;
Naughty Miss Nobody, she tells lies;
Painted Miss Nobody makes hearts ache;
Sly Cinderella takes the cake."

"Will no one stop those wretches, for goodness' sake?" broke in Diana shrilly, as the chorus rose and fell, and I stood helpless, aghast, frozen with shame and astonishment. Dully, I wondered why Diana, of all others, should be the first to come to my rescue. "Surely, Sir George," she went on in a lowered tone, "surely you might do something to keep them from openly insulting Miss Brand, for all the world to hear?"

"How absurd!" he answered coldly and clearly, his voice almost as widely audible as the singing had been; for it had stopped now, and the masked minstrels were hurrying their punt away among the crowd. "How absurd, and how—if you had not been the speaker, I should have said—how malicious! As if anyone in his senses could possibly connect a vulgar doggerel verse with a lady—with the lady whose name you mentioned, of all people!"

"Nevertheless, she was the one meant, without doubt, and everyone will know it," went on Diana, undaunted by his reproach. "It will be all over London by to-morrow, for there's been so much curiosity and gossip. Everybody's heard the story about Peckham, of course. I should have thought it would be best to stop those creatures. Fancy verses being written on the subject! But, then, poor dear little Consuelo's such a celebrity that——"

I knew now why she had hastened to break in upon the singers, and why no one else had interrupted. I had been too horrified, too struck by the lightning flash of shame, to be logical at first, but I realized at last that silence, not loud championship, was the part of a true friend. Every one except Diana had bravely striven to show that they had drawn no inference from the verses, that no moral had been pointed by them, no gossip-tale adorned.

It had been left for Diana to raise the storm, and she had no mercy. Mercy? I believed now, when I began to think again, after the blow which had numbed me, that Diana had planned the whole scene. A little money, a little ingenuity, and plenty of malice, would have been the sole ingredients needed for the prescription; and she had had them all.

"There are a number of fools and scandal-mongers in the world, I admit," said Sir George fiercely, before Diana could finish; "but I don't think quite so meanly of my fellows as to suppose them so vile, so stupid, as you fancy them, Miss Dunbar. That being the case —and as I am certain that everyone here agrees with me—we can do no better than to drop the subject once and for all. A couple of mountebanks have squalled a music-hall song. They may attach some obscure meaning to the words; but to those in a different class of life they can seem nothing but doggerel, neither worth talking of nor worth thinking of."

" 'Miss Nobody' is Consuelo's nickname, though, you know that, and 'My Lady Cinderella,' " Diana stoutly insisted, though her face was marble white in the blue

dimness. "She must have heard that herself, so she can't mind my repeating it, for I wouldn't be ill-natured for the world."

"I have never heard it," said Sir George. "Women do hear extraordinary things sometimes, to be sure, because they don't knock each other down for insulting their friends, as the right sort of men do. I should have thought, if a name were wanted in this case, 'Miss Everybody' would have been more appropriate; for when one is fortunate enough to have Miss Brand for a companion, it always seems as if one had secured everybody who was really worth thinking of."

"Oh, please, please, let us say no more about it!" I implored, in a queer little choked voice, that would sound as if I were stifling a sob. I had not felt like crying before—not when the spiteful words of the song were piercing their way to the most sensitive penetralia of my nerves; not when Diana had brought them home to me still more forcefully. Yet when Sir George spoke for me at last, the tears rose, and would hardly be kept down.

"If anyone speaks a kind word to me now I'm lost," I thought desperately; "for I shall howl, and disgrace myself before them all, and before Diana, too."

But I was saved from that ordeal. The crisis was past; people found their tongues, and forced themselves to break the shocked silence. They had the tact to begin laughing and talking of other things—a ridiculous darky with a red wig and a tall collar, picking

a banjo; the first rocket of the evening shooting comet-like across the sky.

Lady Forth drew near, and put her arm round me in a pretty motherly way, though she was not many years my senior, and hurried into a comical account of an accident which had happened to the *Idle Hour* during last year's regatta.

Five minutes after the masked minstrels had vanished no one would have dreamed that our peace had been for an instant disturbed. But my heart was thumping against my side like the strokes of a hammer, and the calm seemed to me only that which comes before a storm.

CHAPTER XVIII

DIANA THROWS DOWN THE GLOVE

I HAD a quaint, pretty little nook of a bedroom, next a large one occupied by Lady Sophie, on the *Idle Hour*. She rustled in to talk over the thing that had happened, when we had said our "Good-nights" to everyone else; and when she had been angry in whispers with my enemies, bidden me be of good heart and ignore the incident, because no one would think the less of me, she disappeared to her own room again.

Lady Sophie thought a great deal of her "beauty sleep," which she declared that at her age she could ill afford to miss; but I had no inclination for bed. I had not forgiven Diana Dunbar; and until I could feel more in charity with her it was no use to try and say my prayers. Without them I had never slept; even with them I should find difficulty enough in composing myself to sleep on this night.

I was slowly brushing out the waves of my long hair in a dressing-gown, endeavouring to attain a proper frame of mind, when I heard a soft knock at the door. At first thought it came from the one which connected with Lady Sophie's room, but the light sound was repeated, and I knew that I had mistaken the direction.

I went to the other door and peeped out. To my surprise, Diana stood there, fully dressed as she had been for dinner.

"Will you let me come in for a few minutes?" she pleaded, in her sweetest voice. "I want particularly to speak with you."

"Can't what you have to say wait until to-morrow?" I returned ungraciously. "I am almost ready for bed, and it's very late."

"Who cares how late it is? To-morrow we are all going away. We shall have no chance for a quiet talk together. You know how few such chances people do get on a house-boat?"

"Yes, I have noticed that," I responded to the inner meaning I suspected. "Come in, then, if you like."

She came, and shut the door, though I would have left it ajar, as a gentle hint that I wished the visit to be brief.

"I want for one thing to tell you how awfully sorry I was for you to-night," she began, sitting down without waiting for the formality of an invitation.

"Thank you. I fancy I know exactly how sorry you were," I responded. "I don't think we need waste words upon that."

I had not sat down when she did, but continued to stand, straight and still, in the middle of the little room. As I finished speaking, Diana sprang up, and laid a hand on each of my shoulders.

"Oh, I wish you would not be so cold with me. I wish you would let me be your friend. I want to

be your friend, really, really!" she asseverated, watching my face to see if I were moved by her protestations.

"I don't make friends easily," I said. "The word means a great deal to me."

"Will you at least let me talk to you as if we were friends?" she entreated.

"I'm ready to listen to anything you care to say."

"Ah, you were not kind. And when I spoke up for you this evening, too! Consuelo, what are you going to do after that wretched affair? It will make a tremendous difference in your future plans, of course."

"Why should it?"

"Why? Oh, you know very little of society, or you would not ask. People whom one fancies are one's friends really care nothing about one's self. They only hang round if one is popular, and it is the fashion to be seen with one. But they would all rather have something nasty than nice to say behind one's back; it is so easy to be witty at one's friends' expense. You can guess that, or they wouldn't have labelled you 'My Lady Cinderella.' It was just smart enough, and apt enough to stick. Now, this episode of to-night will be in all the society papers by the end of the week. Even if they don't use your name, they will have paragraphs so worded that everybody will know who is meant. You've been a good deal talked about already, but after this town will be too hot to hold you with any comfort for yourself, I'm afraid. That's why I'm so sorry for you, dear. Men who

have been apparently at your feet before will forget to ask you to dance. They like a girl to be conspicuous in some ways, but not as you will be now, for that's 'dowdy' and 'bad form'—the two most hopeless things that can be said of a girl nowadays. Hasn't Lady Sophie told you the same?"

"She has not," I said shortly.

"Oh, she was afraid of hurting your feelings, no doubt. She's a good sort; she wouldn't mind a fib for a friend's sake any more than she would for her own, which is so loyal and nice. Every woman fibs for herself; but she generally tells the truth to, or of, her friends."

"I suppose one judges others by one's self," I retorted.

"Don't be horrid, dear; I'm trying to help you. I've been thinking it over, and putting myself in your place. It seemed to me, looking at it so, that you would have to go away, for a time at all events, till this unfortunate affair has blown over—been forgotten for the next nine days' wonder."

"You would suggest that I returned to the Peckham, perhaps, to which you have consigned me."

I spoke icily, though my soul was hot within me.

"I was going to suggest a nice, long, restful visit at a country place of ours, which we seldom use ourselves, though we sometimes lend it to friends. Mamma would be quite willing, I am sure. But why do you say 'the Peckham to which I have consigned you'? I know nothing about Peckham."

"Except that you and Lady Dunbar followed me

there," I burst forth, reckless now of consequences. "Except that you have both set inquiries on foot regarding me. Except that you have started all the gossip—made the gossip. You and Lady Dunbar have your own reasons for not wishing your interest in me to be known, so you do not speak out what you have learned by spying. You work in an underhand way, lest the scandal should be traced to you. You want to get rid of me, and you hire music-hall singers to hound me out of your world."

"How dare you?" cried Diana, even now scarcely raising her voice, for she had been well trained to conventionalities, and the walls of the *Idle Hour* were thin. "How dare you accuse me of such things? Why, if you repeated your words, I—I could sue you for them if I liked. There's a law in England which discourages the speaking of scandal, just as it does blackmail and libel. I should have thought in the rank of life you came from you would have known more about them than I do. Why should I want to get rid of you? for dragging in my mother's name is too ridiculous. Do you think I am jealous of you?"

"I think that you hate me," I replied.

"I do not care that for you!" she snapped her fingers, the pretence of friendship forgotten now in this vivid moment, which was showing me the real woman. "I suppose that you think I am annoyed because of George Seaforth's flirtation with you? What nonsense! As though he were a man to marry a little upstart from nobody-knows-where! I have looked on, laughing in my sleeve, while the paltry farce was played, wonder-

ing how you would feel if you knew that I had refused him last year, when he really cared for me, as he pretends to care for you now. That habit of his —amusing himself with every new girl who comes along—has grown upon him since those days; but George is a proud man, proud of himself and his family, whose boast is that not one of their long line has ever made a *mèsalliance*. Knowing nothing of you, he would not have married you, even if he had been genuinely in love. Knowing the truth about you, he would do still less."

"He is welcome to know all—everything that can be known of me!" I cried.

"Why you came to live with Lady Sophie, among other things?"

Her eyes burned into mine, as if she would have dragged an answer from me, if necessary, with red-hot pincers.

For the first time I quailed, feeling that she had an undue advantage—that I was groping in the dark, while she held a light.

"What do you know of that?" I questioned.

"I will tell you, if you will give me your version of the story first."

She hesitated for an instant bfore making me this offer.

"I came because Lady Sophie took a fancy to me, and invited me; that is all," I answered.

"Nonsense! Think of something more credible. No one who knows Lady Sophie de Gretton and her circumstances would believe that for a single second. She

must have been influenced by some extraordinary motive in taking up a girl like you."

"Must have been!" I echoed. "Then you do not know why she did it. You are only trying to find out through me."

She gave a slight start, and drew her lips together.

"Well," she said, in a changed tone, after a moment's pause, "that was rather a slip. To tell you the truth, I don't know."

"Neither do I," I retorted. "I know no more than I have told you, which was the reason Lady Sophie gave. She likes me; she is an impulsive woman who enjoys novelty. I believe that it was exactly as she said."

"Then you were never so mistaken in your life. You are letting yourself live in a fools' paradise. But though I don't know the explanation of the mystery, and therefore can't enlighten you, I will find out; and then you shall hear the truth from my lips, Consuelo Brand."

"There is nothing to find out," I persisted, though my heart grew cold.

"There is something. What, I swear to you I will find out before I am many weeks older."

"You are good at spying," I flung at her. "But if you spread more stories about me, everyone shall hear what I know of your and Lady Dunbar's reasons for taking an interest in me. I don't want to be revengeful, yet I must defend myself."

"If you tell what you imagine, but cannot know, not

only will I tell you all I discover of Lady Sophie's mystery, but I will tell the whole world as well."

Her eyes frightened me. I had not known that the face of a girl could express such hatred as flashed from hers to me.

CHAPTER XIX

A PARAGRAPH IN A LETTER

LADY SOPHIE suffered from headache the day we left Henley. The doctor pronounced her attack a mild form of sunstroke, which she had courted during those hot days on the river; and his advice was that she should have rest and mountain air, ten days at least of quiet, before returning for Goodwood and Cowes. I offered my services as nurse, only too glad of a chance to show my loving gratitude for all that I owed to her kindness; and she was to see no one but me and Adèle.

"Mountain air" Lady Sophie interpreted to mean Cumberland, where a distant cousin of hers had a place, and (conveniently for her present plans) deserted it for half the year to live abroad. He was at present in Switzerland, but a telegram sent to his bankers was duly and favourably answered, and by the time that Lady Sophie felt able to travel she had heard that the house was placed at her disposal.

I should have been nothing short of brutal if I had not shut myself up with the invalid, waiting upon her, keeping her amused as best I could; and I took no credit to myself for doing so, especially as, for some reasons, I was not sorry to be out of town for

a few days. But Lady Sophie's illness and our journey, with the doctor's commands debarring her from all society, effectually cut me off for a fortnight from George Seaforth.

Twice before we left for Cumberland he called, but once I was bathing Lady Sophie's aching head with eau de Cologne, and could not leave her; again, she was sleeping with my hand in hers, and, as Adèle was her mistress's faithful dragon, I did not hear of the visit until it was of the past.

From Cumberland Lady Sophie answered a letter from Sir George, assuring him that she would be back in London again before Goodwood, so that he need not fear we should fail him as guests; and after that there were other letters and flowers, in which I sometimes shared.

"Poor George! he's horribly impatient for us to get back," she said, looking up from a letter which had just been received, a few days before the one more or less definitely fixed for our return. "What would you give, Consuelo, to know some of the things he says here about you?"

"It depends whether they are good or bad," I replied, with an attempt at smiling indifference.

"Which do you think they are more likely to be?"

"Oh, I suppose he would not say anything very rude to you about your guest."

"If you will tell me your exact opinion of him I may be tempted to ignore the confidential understanding between George and me, and read you a paragraph or two of the letter."

"I wouldn' have you betray confidence for the world. Besides, I haven't anything so fixed as an opinion of Sir George Seaforth. Sometimes I—fancy he's rather a flirt."

"He has never flirted with you, at all events, no matter what he may have been in the past. He is over head and ears in love with you, Consuelo. Of course you must know that, though you've always avoided the subject with me before."

"He has never told me that he cared," I answered stiffly, though I only felt shy.

"That is because—well, he had certain quixotic reasons of his own for not doing so at first. Some day, if you are kind to him, he may confess to you what they were. Afterwards, when he was carried off his feet, and so far beyond his depth that he forgot scruples —at Henley, for instance—he never had the chance. Oh, don't fancy for a moment that I did not see what was going on there—Diana Dunbar making herself a sort of buffer between you and George—for my eyes have been open to the things of this world longer than I like to admit. I did see everything, and perhaps I might have interfered to circumvent Diana; but I was certain that you would not thank me, and equally certain that the more he was tantalized, the deeper in love that spoiled boy George would be."

"Why do you call him a 'spoiled boy'?" I questioned, half vexed on his behalf.

"Oh, so many girls have thrown themselves at his head since he came into his father's title and money and two or three good houses, of which any normal

woman would give her ears to be mistress, even if a rather desirable young man were not thrown in. But he's a different person since he's known you. What shall you say to him, Consuelo, when he asks you to marry him?"

"Hadn't I better wait to make up my mind," I asked, "like the well-regulated maiden you are teaching me to be, until Sir George does ask me to marry him—if he ever does?"

I spoke lightly, wishing that I could close her mouth without seeming ungrateful for her interest in me, but the lightness was all assumed.

"He won't propose by letter. No real man who is worth his salt ever does that, unless every other way is closed to him. He'll keep himself in hand till he sees you; and at his own house he may have some foolishly chivalrous idea about not disturbing your mind while you are a guest under his roof; but ten to one he'll yield to temptation, and you'll have your chance to say you will or won't be Lady Seaforth while you are at Southwood Park."

"Perhaps, after that horrid night at Henley——" I began, but Lady Sophie irritably cut me short.

"There's no such 'perhaps,' and you know it, for even you know George better than to do him so great an injustice."

"He hasn't heard yet what a nobody I really am—what a fraud——"

"Don't be an idiot, my child! It is bad for my nerves. I'm still far from strong. With some men what you speak of might make a difference, but not

with George. It is you he loves; and really, though he has a great deal to offer, I must say that he would be getting very good value in exchange. There! you haven't told me that you will accept him——"

"No," I ventured to interrupt, *sotto voce.*

"But you have left me to form my own conclusions, and those conclusions justify me in reading you the paragraph in his letter I was hinting to you about. You needn't look frightened, as if you were going to do him a wrong by listening. He only writes of the room you are to have at Southwood Park when we pay our visit there, and the part that is really a secret I shall keep. He shall have the pleasure of surprising you. But hear this: 'She is to have the octagon, bay-window room, which you may remember; and when I paid it a visit of inspection the other day it seemed to me that, though I had always thought it the prettiest at Southwood, it was not half nice enough for her. Everything looked shabby, and I have ordered in a lot of new odds and ends. In the midst of the transformation I remembered something you had told me soon after she came to you, and I——' but that is where the secret begins. You mustn't ask me any more questions, my dear."

I did not even wish to ask. For the first time since we had left Henley I was happy, far too happy to be curious. It was sweet to have heard the paragraph, to have thrilled at the thought that Sir George called me "she" without the formality of using my name; to know that I was in his mind, though he had not

seen me for more than a week, and that he was busying himself for my pleasure.

We went back to town three days before Goodwood, to have the dresses already ordered fitted, and to test Lady Sophie's recovered strength at two balls. Sir George had not been informed that we meant to return rather earlier than we had expected, and I trusted that I might attribute his absence partly to that reason. He was at Southwood Park, it appeared, where he hoped to receive us in two days' time.

Despite Diana's gloomy prognostications, there had been no reference to the Henley dispute in any reputable paper—I was sure this was not Miss Dunbar's fault—and I seemed to be higher in public favour on my first reappearance than I had been before.

I dared to be happy; I dared to think that my little romance was to have a joyful ending after all. I even dared to think of Diana's threats with comparative indifference. Lady Sophie had told me the whole truth about her first impulsive fancy for me, I said to myself; there was no mystery in it, or if there were, it was not one that I need fear to have Diana Dunbar or anyone else in the world discover.

So we travelled down to Goodwood, two or three friends who were to be of the house-party turning up for the same train. Sir George himself met us at the station, and I sat beside him as we drove towards Southwood Park.

"Now for the surprise," I whispered excitedly to myself, far enough from guessing what that surprise would prove to be.

The house at Southwood Park was old and rambling —not half as grand as Lady Sophie reported Sir George's Warwickshire place to be, but lovable and quaint, with labyrinthine passages and unexpected rooms. A plump old personage with denting pink dimples and rustling black silk showed Lady Sophie and me to the quarters which were to be ours for the next three days, and her pleasure in my spontaneous cry of delight at sight of my room was evident, though decently controlled.

It was a dainty nook, with two bow-windows, like great bubbles, half across the oddly-shaped room. There were dark, wainscoted walls, and blue Delft plates, and old furniture, with glints here and there of shining brass. There was new chintz, crisp, glittering white, with pink moss roses; there were bookshelves filled with white-and-gold bound volumes, and there were flowers elsewhere. But, after the first delighted, comprehensive glance, my eyes turned from all these to one object that stood between the windows.

It was a Chippendale escritoire, so like the one which had been mine that, if it were indeed another, the two must have been made at the same time and from the same pattern.

Without a word I walked to it. The housekeeper had by this time curtsied herself away, so that Lady Sophie (who had already seen her room, adjoining) was sole witness of my astonishment.

"That is Sir George's surprise for you," she said. "I told him one night, weeks ago, that you were grieved at having lost a Chippendale escritoire which had been

your mother's; and he did not forget. In the letter I partly read out to you he asked me if he might give you one, which he had just bought with that hope, and wanted to you to find waiting your inspection in this room. Afterwards it is to be sent to Park Lane; but I fancy it will soon find its way back here again."

She paused, no doubt expecting me to protest. But I was deeply absorbed, and I do not think I even blushed at her inference.

"This is the strangest thing, Lady Sophie," I exclaimed excitedly. "How on earth did Sir George contrive to find my old escritoire? It is wonderful, for I am sure now it is the same! He must have been tracing it somehow all this time."

I had opened the Chippendale, which had been beautifully cleaned and renovated, and inside had discovered proof incontestable, to me who knew it so well.

"These are my initials," I said, pointing, 'C. B.' Jimmy East cut the letters one day with a new penknife his father had given him on his birthday. I was cross, and he defended himself by arguing that the initials were so small no one who did not know they were there would notice them. I remember it as if it were yesterday, though it happened two or three years ago."

"George didn't mention to me that he had any hope of securing your own desk," returned Lady Sophie. "I don't understand how he can have done it, for I said very little: my words would have passed out of his mind within the hour, if his memory had not been perfected by that patent process called love. I didn't

even describe the thing, for I could not. You had only spoken of a Chippendale escritoire. You had better ask him all about it after dinner this evening. I'll see that you have a good chance."

This time the colour did come flying up to my face, for I read the hidden meaning under her words. She expected to be in a position to wish me joy to-night.

We parted, with the mystery as deep as ever, for there was little time for discussion, save upon the business of the moment. We had to dress for dinner, with the help of Adèle, whom Lady Sophie had brought to Southwood Park.

When the mistress was ready, the maid came in to me to give the finishing touches, which were all I cared to have from her; so it happened that Lady Sophie was resplendent in pearl satin, while I was still in cambric and lace; and she sailed in, fastening her bracelets, to watch the creation of my latest effects.

"You were never lovelier, dear!" she said when Adèle had given me her blessing, with the last hook and eye on my rose tulle frock. "Pink is love's colour," she whispered, pinching my cheek, and bending to bestow one of her rare kisses. "Who knows but this night will prove the most eventful of your life so far —the end of one phase, the beginning of another?"

If we had known how Lady Sophie's prophecy was to be fulfilled, I wonder if I could still have gone downstairs with a light in my eyes and a smile on my lips?

Sir George took Lady Forth into dinner, but I sat on his left hand. We did not speak much to each

other at first, and only of commonplace things; but commonplaces were glorified on this first evening I had ever spent under his roof. In my eyes there had never been so perfect a dinner-table. Even the old butler and the smart young footmen were notable men; I was grateful for every plate that was set noiselessly down before me as if it had been a personal favour. Diana Dunbar was not here; there would be no discords in the music of life for me to-night.

"Mine is the sweetest little room," I said in a low voice to Sir George, when Lady Forth was for a moment preoccupied by a distinguished general. "And the desk—thank you so much for it. It was the kindest thought. How did you manage to find it?"

I had not meant to speak of this until after dinner, as our conversation at the table must consist of broken scraps. But my impatience got the better of me, and I reflected that plans, like promises, are often made to be broken.

"I am glad you like it!" he exclaimed, his face looking bright and eager. "I got hold of the desk simply enough; just told a man to look out for me, and finally heard through him that something of the sort I wanted was to be sold at auction a few days ago (a poor Johnny with a fad for collecting antiques had gone bankrupt, and his treasures had to be disposed of), so I attended the sale myself. It was rather good sport; and, by the way, I have a queer thing in connection with it to tell you; but it is rather a long story, so perhaps it had better wait until after dinner. You'll give me a little chance to talk to you, when I can

induce some of these lazy old war-dogs to move from the table? That's the worst of being host. But do you know, Miss Brand, I have been deliberately selfish, and asked down only married chaps, who wouldn't try to snap what I wanted from under my very nose the instant they could get to the drawing-room."

Naturally I hurried back to safer ground, metaphorically taking my stand upon the escritoire.

"I am longing to hear all about the desk," I said. "It seems too good to be true that I should have it once more, after fearing it was lost for ever."

Sir George opened his eyes, and looked at me in a puzzled way, oblivious of the fact that Lady Forth had been in the act of returning to her allegiance.

"You don't mean to say," he exclaimed, "that it's your own escritoire come back to you? By Jove, I am in luck!"

"And did you mean to say you didn't know it was mine?"

"Indeed I did—glad as I would be to claim credit that I don't deserve."

"What a concidence, then! I'm not sure which would have been more strange—that you should have traced my escritoire and got it back, or that you should have bought the very thing, of all others, in ignorance."

"This makes certain odd little circumstances seem queerer than ever," said Sir George. "Would you mind telling me how you lost your desk?"

"Oh, the cousin with whom I lived sold it to a dealer without my knowledge because I had offended

her! That was quite simple—in one of her type; but it was curious that next day a man, claiming to be a solicitor interested in my affairs, should have called, and offered money even for one look at the escritoire. He afterwards went to the dealer's and tried to buy it for a very large sum, but it had already been disposed of to a man the dealer had never seen before. I heard all this from my cousin's little boy—such a dear!—the only friend I had until—until I met Lady Sophie."

"And now you have more than you know what to do with. But did you find out the solicitor's name, or anything about him?"

"I found out that he was middle-aged, had gray hair, and wore big, dark spectacles."

"By Jove, that fellow Wynnstay!"

"So I thought."

Our eyes met. I think we were both remembering the rainy night when we had come together so strangely at Holland Park Mansions—remembering Mr. Wynnstay's explanations, my suspicions, and Sir George's consoling dissuasions.

"Look here, Miss Brand, I'm not much of a chap for raking up mysteries, but I begin to believe there really is one here; perhaps it may not amount to much, but, anyhow, it's just as well that we—that you have got that escritoire. Did it never occur to you there might be a secret drawer holding papers of importance, if not to you, then to someone else?"

"A secret drawer?" I echoed. "No. I thought I knew the resources of that escritoire from beginning to end. I'm almost certain that, if there had been any-

thing of the kind, my mother would have told me of it; or if not, that I must have discovered it long ago."

"These things are not always so easily discovered, unless one suspects, and knows how to look for them. If I were you, I would institute a thorough search. Particularly——"

"I will," I impulsively broke in. "I'll begin this very night. But why 'particularly'?"

"Because—well, that long story I was saving up to tell you after dinner is, in short, this: Wynnstay was at the sale I spoke of; I recognised him instantly, though I had only met him that night when you and I saw him together. He rushed in, in a great hurry, rather late, and looked ready to kill someone when he found out that this Chippendale escritoire had just been knocked down to me. He came up afterwards, and tried all he knew to get me to sell it again to him, saying it had once belonged to someone of whom he had been very fond, and he'd only just traced it, after searching in vain for a long time. Of course I had no idea that the desk had been yours, and when I saw him so upset, I was half inclined to be good-natured and let him have it; but then I thought how small a chance there was of getting another as pretty, before you came to Southwood, and I hardened my heart. I'm so jolly glad now——"

But Lady Forth had asked him some question.

Perhaps it was as well that the story had been told me in brief, without waiting, or, as things were to fall out, I might never have heard it at all.

I knew that the men would be at least twenty min-

utes at the table before coming to us in the drawing-room, and I determined to utilize the interval ere I should be called upon to redeem my promise to Sir George in ransacking the escritoire for that suggested secret drawer.

As the ladies trooped out of the dining-room, I—the least, the youngest, the last, and only untitled one of the party—flew across the hall to the wide oak staircase that wound above.

There were numerous turns and passages, with steps up and down, to be traversed on the way to my octagon room with the bow-windows; but I met no one. As I paused before my own door, I thought that I heard a slight sound inside. "Adèle," I observed to myself as I turned the handle. The door stuck a little, but I gave a resolute push, and it flew open.

Someone was kneeling at the desk, and, surprised by my sudden entrance, was in the act of rising from her knees. But it was not Adèle. It was Diana Dunbar, and round her, on the floor, were scattered in confusion every drawer, every movable stick of wood from the escritoire.

She sprang up, her eyes dilated, her bosom, under a dark evening cloak, rising and falling. For a moment we stared at each other without speaking; but it was I who first found breath.

"Good-evening, Miss Dunbar," I said. "You didn't expect me quite so soon, perhaps?"

CHAPTER XX

"I HOLD YOU IN THE HOLLOW OF MY HAND"

"I WAS writing you a letter," Diana Dunbar answered, defiant, but panting. "There it is—on the desk—half done."

She pointed to a sheet of paper and an envelope with a pen lying beside them. The whole room was perfumed with the sweet, subtle scent that always hung about her person and her clothing. I felt that I should have known she had been there even if she had gone before I came.

"I drove over from Mrs. Marlowe's, where we are staying," she desperately went on. "I wanted very much to see you. Dinner here was later than with us, and you had not yet finished. I could not wait, so I asked for Lady Sophie's maid, and bade her show me into your room, where I might sit down quietly and write."

"Is it your custom to write on your knees, and do you always take out the drawers of the desk at which you sit before beginning?" I demanded severely.

"I found the drawers exactly as they are now, and left them so. I don't know who has disturbed your desk, certainly not I. I had dropped something of my own, and stooped to look for it just before you came——"

"I don't doubt that you had 'stooped to look for something," I said with emphasis, "but I venture to think that the something was mine, not yours."

"Of what do you accuse me?" she fiercely broke in.

"You have been sent here by the man who calls himself Wynnstay. But for him you would have heard nothing of this escritoire. What he and Lady Dunbar know about me you know now also, though you may not have known it long. You perhaps have a separate purpose of your own in coming, but you are 'killing two birds with one stone.' Still, I think that I was in time; I think that you have not yet done what you tried to do."

"You are mad!" she ejaculated. "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't believe you know yourself."

"You were looking for the secret drawer with the papers," I said, as decidedly as if I were not speaking at a venture, merely making use of Sir George's presumption to startle her if she were guilty.

As I uttered the words, I kept my eyes upon her face, and in the clear electric light with which she had flooded the room I saw her colour come and go. She drew in her breath sharply, but before she could speak I had begun again, moved by some influence which I did not understand—an influence that did not whisper of the dark horror that can come of a few impulsive words.

"I might have saved you the trouble," I went on, almost calmly, "if you had chosen to ask me instead of trying to help yourself. I have already opened the

drawer and removed the papers, which shall never leave me after this until I choose to make use of them."

"You little fiend! you little tiger-cat!" she hissed.

"Ah! you don't pretend to misunderstand me any longer."

"It's your turn now, Consuelo Brand; you have the advantage of me in this one move; I admit it. No, I won't pretend to misunderstand you. I did know about the escritoire; I did look for the drawer. Those papers you have are of no importance to you. They are useless; you can do nothing with them. But my poor mother, whose life has been a tragedy, cannot bear that they should exist. Haven't you seen how she has changed in the past few weeks? She has aged ten years in as many days. My heart has been breaking for her. At last I persuaded her to tell me all the truth. 'You don't think I can help you,' I said, 'but the mouse gnawed the net that held the lion prisoner, and you must not despise what I can do.' If I could have got into this room (which was mine last year when we stayed here) and discovered the drawer and the papers by the instructions which I had brought with me, before you came, I would have done it and gone away. Yet I had provided for this thing that has happened."

"You had provided for it by telling me falsehoods, which I did not believe, but found you out instead," I interpolated.

"Yes, I did tell you falsehoods. I am working for another, not myself, and I am not too scrupulous in a good cause. If you had believed my story about the

letter (which I really did begin, as a blind), I would have given you certain information which it is in my power to give, and left you with my other errand undone, hoping for better luck next time. But you did not believe; you thought yourself supernaturally clever in reading my real motive and flinging it at my head. Well, I am no coward; I admit the truth, as I was ready from the first to do if the necessity arose. You cannot harm me, but I—I hold you in the hollow of my hand, like a white mouse whose bones I can crunch—crunch! I will offer you just one chance, white mouse. Show yourself merciful to a poor woman who is growing old, who has done you no evil, and I'll leave you the piece of luck that by a fluke has come in your way. Give me those papers, valueless to you, because they can prove nothing, but precious to my mother, and I stand aside. You may marry Sir George Seaforth in peace—if you can get him."

"I cannot see why you should be the arbiter of my fate, Miss Dunbar," I answered quietly, though my voice trembled. "It seems to me the worst of taste that you and I should discuss such a subject; while as for the papers, they are mine, and I shall certainly not give them up."

My words surprised myself. Until she had confirmed my vague suspicions, I had been in the dark regarding the existence of a secret drawer and its suppositious contents. But now the papers that were hidden alike from me and those who had risked so much to obtain them were the immediate jewels of my soul.

If possession be nine points of the law, they were hardly yet my property. But I felt them so much mine that I would have cut off my right hand sooner than yield them to Diana Dunbar or any of her faction.

"Have you no heart?" she retorted—"no pity for my mother?"

"Has she any pity for me?" I echoed.

Somehow the words went home, and Diana winced; why, I did not know.

"You are mistaken in thinking that I cannot be the 'arbiter of your fate,' she quoted. "At this moment your future rests with me. To be sure, after what I could tell you, a thoroughly mercenary girl, eaten up with ambition, utterly devoid of self-respect, might marry a man and be happy in getting what she had bargained to get. But though I hate you as I never hated any other human being, I do you the justice to believe you are not such a girl as that. Ignorance is bliss; ignorance is often honourable. If you would keep it, give up the papers."

"I shall not give up the papers," I repeated, and moved to the bell, which by raising my hand I could touch.

There had been that in Diana's fine eyes for the fraction of a second which had warned me that prudence might be valour. She had been led to believe that I had the papers (whatever they were) on my person; and she was a bigger, stronger woman than I. I had spoken that which was not true in saying that I had found the secret drawer, and removed its contents; but the words had seemed to utter themselves

without my volition. I was to be punished for them later; but now I did not wish Diana to learn by force the deception I had practised.

"Very well, then, keep the papers, and repent at leisure. There are many ways of making you regret your obstinacy, and I assure you they won't be lacking. But you have chosen knowledge instead of ignorance, and now you shall hear why you can never be George Seaforth's wife, if you would retain your self-respect."

"What if I refuse to hear you?" I said, my voice sounding strangely faint and far-away in my own ears. "What if I touch the bell, and bid Adèle show you downstairs?"

"Do so, and the story shall come to you from other lips than mine. I promised you a fortnight ago that I would find out the secret of your coming to Lady Sophie de Gretton. I have found it out. And if you will not hear it from me, I shall do as I once threatened, and tell the truth to the whole world. I do not believe George Seaforth has ever asked you to marry him, or ever will. But if he should do so, it will only be through a mistaken sense of honour, because he feels that his folly has irretrievably injured you, spoiled your future. Shall all your so-called friends whisper about this thing that I know, until the story comes to you, or will you hear it now from me?"

"I will hear it now from you," I echoed mechanically.

"Very well," said Diana. She paused a moment, and then went on: "One night, a few months ago, three young men were dining together at their club. Some-

how the subject of women who were famous as beauties came up. One of the three said that to become a social celebrity a girl must, in the first place, have a good social position, and her people must be well and favourably known. Or else she must be a great heiress, with money enough to force herself down the throat of society.

"The second man thought rather differently. He argued that a woman's fame as a beauty depended upon some lucky chance. Nobody could ever tell why one girl or woman, perhaps not as handsome as her neighbours, should suddenly be lauded above them as the most exquisite being on earth. (Of course actresses and other professionals who live by making themselves conspicuous did not come into the category at all; these men were talking merely of women in society.)

"And the third man's opinion differed from his friends. He said that it would be the easiest thing in the world to make the reputation of a beauty. A few newspapers might do it, if they went to work in the right way; but still better would it be for a popular young man to undertake the task.

"He then went on to bet that he himself could 'work such a scheme.' Given a young woman, pretty, well educated, with decent manners, no matter how poor, how insignificant, how entirely unknown at the beginning of a season, by the end he could render her the most-admired, most-sought-after girl in town.

"His friends wanted to know how he would accomplish this. It would be very simple, he returned. He would show the girl great attention, send her flowers,

be apparently her devoted slave. He would rave over her perfections at every opportunity, and by force of example induce others to think it was 'the thing' to admire her inordinately.

"His two companions were ready to bet him almost anything that with all his popularity he could not make a celebrity of an unknown girl, without money or position, try as he would. What had begun in idle fun ended in earnest. There was a wager between the three of a thousand pounds, the man who had made the bet to divide the sum between the other two, if by the end of the season he had failed in bringing off his coup.

"He was to ask a certain lady, well known in the set to which they all belonged, to find a suitable young woman. She was to have so much for her trouble in chaperoning and launching the girl in society, and Ge—— the man was to pay the Experiment's board, pay for her smart clothing, and see that she had plenty of pocket-money——"

"Be silent!" I cried out in ungovernable anguish, writhing under the lash of the awful words. "I'll not believe it. You are lying to me."

"So you guess the man's name? You see now why Lady Sophie de Gretton took you up; why, though she is poor, and stingy, and selfish, you have had every luxury. You understand why George Seaforth has been at your feet, has let himself be gossiped about as your admirer. Think of it! Everything you have on at this moment, from your shoes to your pretty pink frock, has been paid for out of his pocket."

I shuddered, and a low moan of misery came shivering from my lips.

"It isn't true! You mean to kill me!" I stammered, with a tearing sob.

"Ask George himself. I dare you to ask him," Diana taunted me.

"I would not so insult him. You are safe in bidding me do that, and you know it. Why——" and I seemed to draw a breath of free air, as I caught at the wings of hope—"why, you are my enemy! You want to ruin me. You have tried before, and failed. Girls in certain books and plays believe what the villains tell them, and die of grief, or give up the men they love, for a lie's sake. You are the villain of my story; but I am not such a poor toy. I am a living, breathing woman. I do love George Seaforth, and I think that he loves me. I should be unworthy of his love if I wronged him by so base, so hateful a suspicion. Only you could have been cruel enough to invent such a tale. Now that you have told it, now that you have done your worst, leave me, with the thought that you have failed again."

"You are less of a woman than I fancied you!" she cried. "You do believe, but you would shut your eyes to the truth. You would marry him in spite of all, because he is rich, because he could give you a good position. But you will find yourself mistaken. He has gone as far as he will go in this flirtation. You will never be asked to be his wife, and you will have dragged your dignity in the dust in vain."

"If I thought for an instant that you had told me

the truth, I would never see him again; I would leave his house to-night," I said, my voice under control once more. "But your fingers are not skilful enough to play upon my heartstrings whatever tune you please. I was startled, carried out of myself at first; but I am stronger again now. If you do not leave me instantly I will ring the bell and have you turned out of the house."

"Oh, I am going, though if you were not the common, underbred person that you are, you would not stoop to rid yourself of me by force."

Diana moved to the door and opened it.

"Just one thing more," she said. "Jack Marlowe, at whose mother's house I am staying, was one of the men in the wager. Jerry Weyland was the other, and it was he who confessed to me. I had to promise to marry him before I could make him speak, but it was worth it. And I shall keep the promise or not as I please. He will tell you what he told me, if you choose to ask him."

"I do not choose," I responded steadily.

"Lady Sophie, then. If you surprised her with what you know, you could get the whole truth from her."

"I will tell her what I have heard from you," I corrected. "I have meant to do that since you began. One only asks questions when one has suspicions. I have none. But she shall know what you have done and said to-night."

"I wish you joy of the interview," Diana cried, with a bitter laugh.

And she was gone before I could have answered, if I would.

For a long time I stood still, my hands tightly clasped above my heart—and they were cold as hands of ice. Only a few minutes had passed since I had left the light and laughter and flower-fragrance of the dining-room, yet I felt as if I had lived through years. I had spoken confidently to Diana, and I trusted that I had sent her away with a galling sense of defeat.

But her words had stung me with the sting of poisonous serpents. I had said truly that I did not believe Sir George could so cruelly have wronged me, but her story might explain many things. The hot, scandalous breath of it had power to blow away the mystery which had bewildered me, as a wind dissipates a low-lying fog on a mountain-side. I could not help recalling each merciless detail she had flung at me. What if, after all, the tale were true?

"I won't let myself think of it!" I exclaimed, half aloud, striving against the insidious whisperings that seemed to mutter in my ears, as though hissed by the lips of evil spirits. "I'll go down—"

But at the door I paused. How could I go down? I had not thought of a mirror; but I knew that I must be pale and strange to look upon. Despite the training of the past few weeks, I was not actress enough to smile and cover the gnawing fox with my cloak.

If I could bring myself to face them all in the drawing-room, where the men must have arrived by this time, and Sir George would be looking for me,

it would be better than staying here alone. I felt as if I might go mad if I were shut up with my misery, to fight against torturing fears, and the doubts that were so disloyal to my love.

Yet I was afraid if I went among the others I might break into hysterical sobbing. It would be horrible to have eyes upon me now; they would be like separate pincers, searching for my quivering nerves.

If I stayed I might try to banish the consciousness of trouble, by examining the escritoire, which was still open and empty, as Diana had left it. For a moment I contemplated the effort, but almost at once dismissed the thought.

My brain was in a turmoil. It would be impossible to concentrate my mind, in such a mood, upon a consistent plan of operation. When I had been reassured by Lady Sophie—dear, kind Lady Sophie!—as I surely, surely would be reassured before this night was over, then I should be in proper condition to make the trial.

As I thought, with a childishly homesick longing, of Lady Sophie, craving the comfort of her presence, there came a light tap, with a suggestion of rings clicking against the panel, on my door.

Almost simultaneously, without waiting for permission, Lady Sophie herself came in. I felt superstitiously that my wish had brought her to me, and, hurrying towards her, I wound my arms about her waist.

"Why, my dear child," she exclaimed, "what a little ghost you look! Are you ill?"

She held me closely, as I nestled to her, and the

perfume of her laces, with a single rose she wore, was sweet as consolation. Everything would be right now. Everything must be right. Such misery as I had contemplated, staring down over a dark precipice of fear, was too bad, too cruel, to come into my young life.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ORDEAL BY FIRE

"Oh, you dear, I'm so glad you're here," I whispered. "I've had a shock. Diana Dunbar has been in my room. I came up, and found her looking through the escritoire. See! all the drawers are lying about. She has been saying horrible things to me. I feel half dead."

"The vindictive wretch!" responded Lady Sophie satisfactorily. "I shouldn't have thought jealousy would have carried even her so far. But she could say nothing to you which you need mind. George doesn't love her, and never did, though she inveigled him into a mild flirtation last year. He loves you, and she can't take his love away from you. There, doesn't that cheer you up?"

"Nothing can cheer me till I've relieved my mind by telling it all to you—the whole hateful story. She said, oh! the most monstrous thing, Lady Sophie—that —that Sir George made a wager——"

Under my arm, which belted her waist, I felt a slight start, that made me glance quickly up into her face. What I saw there turned my heart sick. She looked anxious, apprehensive. Her eyes appeared suddenly to have dilated, and when I would have drawn them, with my pleading ones, they avoided the appeal.

"You should'nt have listened to that malicious girl," she said hastily. You owe it to George——"

"I didn't listen. After strength had come back to me, and I could break in upon her, I told her to leave me. But, oh, Lady Sophie, what I have suffered! I wouldn't believe—but tell me—for the love of Heaven tell me that there never was such a wager—that Sir George never came to you asking you to find a girl, that he might make an experiment, for the sake of making a bet. I——"

"Hush—hush, dear!" faltered Lady Sophie. "Diana has grossly exaggerated."

"Exaggerated? My God! then there is truth in it, after all!"

My arms dropped from her waist. I caught at the back of a chair and held myself up with a rigid grasp, for my knees were giving way.

She came quickly to me again, and snatched one of my hands, though it lay limply in hers.

"Don't, don't be foolish, Consuelo," she commanded, almost harshly. "I can't wonder, if you heard this story from Diana, that you are mortified and shocked. But you must let George speak for himself. I would tell you all there is to tell—really, there's not a great deal!—though I would gladly have kept it from you if I could; but it will be so much better coming from George. He has the right——"

"He has no right if he has done this thing!" I cried.

"You forget, child. He is a man of the world, flattered and spoiled since his boyhood, tired years ago of all the pleasures which seem so wonderful, so

enthralling, to a débutante. Naturally, he took up a novel idea. There are a hundred excuses for him, which only he can plead. You do not really love him, if you could not forgive. Probably Diana has given you a totally wrong version. You must let George know that something of this sort has reached your ears, and put him upon his defence. He will confess everything, like the brave, true fellow that he is at heart."

Confess! Ah, this was perhaps what he would have confessed on that sweet, white day among the lilies. How I wished now that he had finished then! for everything would have been over long ago, and this burning pain at the core of my heart might have ceased to throb so fiercely. By this time a merciful numbness might have come to help me; and at least I should be far, far away, out of his reach, out of his life forever.

"Come—come, dear," Lady Sophie was saying. "Let me go to George. You shall have a talk with him out in the garden. No one shall know. I will arrange it all. In an hour you will be happy again."

I heard her but vaguely. As I answered, a hand seemed clutching at my throat, choking my breath away.

"I can't speak to him," I said, as firmly as I could. "Nothing that you could urge would make me do that, Lady Sophie. You don't realize what it would be; for you are taking so much—so much for granted. He has never said a word of love to me. If he had, if I had been asked to be his wife, and had accepted —if we had been engaged when this story reached me, I might have gone to him with it; though even then

I can't see that it would have done any good. I couldn't have forgotten; I should never have been sure that he was not trying to atone. You admit that—that the thing's true. That ends it."

"How cruel, if you must hear this, that it couldn't have been later!" she exclaimed. "I see how you feel; I see that it would be harder for you to accuse him and ask explanations, than I had thought at first. It might seem like a suggestion that he must compensate you by making an offer of marriage, though I know as well as I know I live, that such a thing would not even occur to George. But write him a letter. I'll help you with it. Sit down now and——"

"No, no," I persisted chokingly. "You must tell me, if I am to hear more."

"I don't know what you have heard already. You are obstinate, unreasonable, Consuelo. You——"

"Is it true that he asked you to find a girl for him —poor, unknown, but a lady, and—not bad-looking? Is it true that this girl was to be used as a pivot for his vanity to turn on—'made into a celebrity,' by a process of vivisection, for all the world to see?"

"The world was not to know. George, two other men, and I——"

"Oh, Lady Sophie, this is the motive for all your kindness, then? That day in the Park——And I loved you so! I could have died for you, in my gratitude!"

"My child, my child, you wring my heart! So did I love you, so do I love you now. I can't tell you how dear you have grown to me, truly, honestly. I entered into this jest before I knew you——"

"This jest!" I echoed, sobbing. "It bids fair to be a sorry jest for me!"

"It will be what you make it. For Heaven's sake take this more quietly, more sensibly, Consuelo. You are shattering my nerves. Good gracious! how shall I talk to you, how can I best make you see reason? Listen to me. Do you remember coming upon George and me that first night at Lady Dunbar's ball, before he had been introduced to you? I don't know whether you heard anything or not. I was afraid then that you had.

"But he'd met you twice after I'd talked with you in the Park, not dreaming that you were the girl I had chosen for his experiment. He admired you more than anyone he had ever seen, and begged that, if it were not too late, I would no longer try to find a protégée to chaperon on his behalf. If you could be got to fill the place, it would be perfect from his point of view. But already he was half in love, and his conscience had begun to wake.

"He saw that, though in carrying out his plan a girl would have advantages given her which otherwise she could never enjoy, still she might have reason to complain if she learned the truth, discovered that she had been used as a sort of pawn in a game of chess. He felt it might be an injustice; but then you came up with Captain Weyland and interrupted us. I had guessed already, from his description, that the paragon of beauty he had seen was none other than Consuelo Brand.

"The day before, I prevented his meeting you at my

house, for I wanted him first to behold my protégée in her pretty new clothes, charmingly framed, presented against a becoming background. But Fate had circumvented me, and I scented a romance. You can imagine what concealed delight I felt in introducing him to the 'experiment' in the shape of the girl he had found and lost again.

"I had almost given up finding the right sort of person when I chanced to see you in the Park that afternoon, and overheard your wish for a different lot in life. Then a voice seemed to say to me, 'There's the very one you have been looking for.' And you must remember, Consuelo, that I asked if you would be ready to give up your old, dull existence for even a few weeks of pleasure and admiration?"

"I remember everything—everything," I said.

"You took your chances. And I honestly thought them very good. I'm a poor woman, and I should not have been able to provide for you; but I saw that you were beautiful, and might be made far more beautiful. I hardly dared hope you would succeed in snaring so splendid and wary a bird as George Seaforth, but it was probable you would have opportunities of marrying well. Now, as it has turned out, you have done better than any other débutante for years. Don't, for the sake of pique, throw away your happiness."

I could not answer. I had dropped into a chair, at last, and sat with my face buried in my hands.

"Tell me, dear, that you are going to be a good, sensible girl," she went on, coaxingly.

What should I say to her? My mind was fixed.

There was only one thing for me to do, and I meant to do it, if it killed me. But I did not want to make a scene, which would only inflame the wound that had been dealt me by turning the dagger in the quivering flesh.

I felt so weak, so utterly spent in body, that I dreaded lest my spirit also should be robbed of strength if again it were flooded with the torrent of her pleading.

"Let me think—I beg that you will let me think," I implored.

I did not look up, and my fingers still covered my wet eyes, but I heard a faint, quick sigh of relief.

"Of course you shall think, child, as much as ever you like," Lady Sophie soothingly assured me. "It is only sudden decisions that I dread. Think—think how good George really is, how handsome; how dearly he loves you, how his heart would be broken if you would not forgive him. When you have thought of all those things, and said to yourself, 'Perhaps if I'm harsh with him now I shall lose him irrevocably, because in sheer misery and angry pique he may ask some other less scrupulous girl to marry him,' you will be ready to possess your soul in patience, and quietly wait for him to propose to you. When he has safely done that, you can fly out at him and accuse him of what you like. He will know then how to defend himself and win your pardon. I defy the hardest woman not to forgive George Seaforth, with his arms around her, those honest eyes of his looking into hers. Now, dear, I'll bathe your head with eau de Cologne as you did

mine when I was ill; and presently you'll be ready to tell me that you've thought it all satisfactorily out, that you are yourself again."

"Thank you, Lady Sophie," I whispered brokenly. "But—but I want to be alone. You are kind—you mean to be kind—only it is better for me to be alone. Please, please! I don't know what will become of me if I can't be quite by myself for a while."

My voice rose stormily; I could not hold it in control; and Lady Sophie rose from her knees by my side with rustling haste.

"Very well. You know what is best for yourself, I suppose," she agreed. "I should have liked to stay with you, but, of course, if you don't want me now, I shall come again by-and-by."

"Not too soon, please; I must have a little time," I pleaded. "If—if anyone asks for me, I have a headache."

"Trust me for that, my poor one; I know how to manage these affairs. Inquiries will come, without doubt, from a certain person by whose desire I really made an excuse to run up and find you. I said I would look for a book I'd brought to Southwood with me, a book we'd luckily been talking about downstairs. They will think I have been a long time gone, but what they think doesn't matter."

"No; what they think doesn't matter," I repeated drearily.

"I'll go now, then, since you send me away. Won't you give me some little message for poor George?"

Poor George! What of poor Consuelo? I bitterly thought.

"I can't say anything," I sharply uttered aloud.

"Oh, well, I can make up something that must do instead."

My lips opened to beg that she would do no such thing, but they closed coldly together again. What did it signify what she said in this brief interval? he would know the truth soon enough.

"In an hour or so I shall peep in at you again," purred Lady Sophie. "Then I hope you will look at me with a smile on your poor little face. Good-bye, dear. Is it in your heart to give me a kiss?"

For an instant I hesitated. But it was only for an instant. At the end, I lifted my tear-stained face, and we kissed each other on the lips. Mine quivered under the touch of hers, and the tears fell once more.

I had loved her well. I had been so happy only an hour ago.

"Good-bye," I said softly.

"Good-bye is a sad word. Au revoir—let it be au revoir."

"I like good-bye so much better," I insisted. "Good-bye, dear Lady Sophie. Good-bye."

In another moment the door had gently closed after her sweeping satins, and I was left alone.

My mind was already made up as to my next act, which was to close the last chapter in my brief love-story. What I had to do must be done quickly, for I could not count upon more than one undisturbed hour. I had told Lady Sophie that I wished to think;

but thought must beyond all else be avoided—until the afterward.

If I sat still and let myself weep over the pictures of the past which would move before me in a panorama—George Seaforth's face and figure always in the foreground—such little strength and courage as were left to me would go.

No sooner had the door shut behind Lady Sophie than I sprang up and began unfastening my dress.

"His money paid for it!" I reminded myself, with a sick shiver. "I am the doll which it has amused him to see tricked out in the latest fashion. His doll was to be the smartest in the show of dolls, or he would not be satisfied. Oh, my God! I thought him so honourable, so chivalrous!"

But I was thinking again, and I must not think. I tried desperately to fix my attention on the business of the moment. What would I not have given if the despised and long-discarded Peckham garments had been in my box, under all the finery brought to Southwood Park? But they lay at the bottom of a drawer at home—no, I mustn't call it home any more!—at Lady Sophie de Gretton's house. The best I could do was to dress myself from head to foot in the plainest things I had at hand—the things, I bitterly reflected, which had cost Sir George Seaforth the smallest amount of money.

Some day, perhaps, I could repay him. My heart beat with a fierce agony of joy as I saw myself in the future writing a cheque for money I had earned. It would have to be a large cheque. I should send

from some far-off place, the farther away the better; and I should add a line, saying, "This is, as nearly as I can calculate, the sum to which I am indebted to you for board, clothing, and incidental expenses during the season I spent in Park Lane." That would be enough.

If he had any heart, any manliness left, this would cut him to the quick. But till then the fact that I must leave his house dressed in the garments paid for by him would remain a part of my humiliation.

I roused myself with a start. Once more I had indulged in the forbidden luxury of thought. In a few minutes I was clad in travelling dress, the neat little frock which I had hopefully put on that afternoon for the short journey.

Then, with a shock, I realized the difficulty regarding money. In my hurried preparations I had not fully looked that question in the face. My purse (what a mockery to call it mine!) was still in the pocket of the gray mohair gown. I remembered, with curling, quivering lip, that it held nearly ten pounds. I could go a long distance with ten pounds; I had not yet quite forgotten how to be economical. But I could not take that money; I could not touch a penny of it, knowing whence it came.

I had kissed Lady Sophie when she had given it to me, as I always did, with a passionate impulse of gratitude, which must manifest itself with each new kindness. No wonder she had blushed and looked uncomfortable sometimes, saying that she "wished I would not thank her."

There were so many things I understood now, and, and, understanding, felt that the world was a cold and cruel place—a place for hypocrites, for pitfalls under the roses, for grinning skulls where once I had seen faces beautiful in benevolence. I marvelled that I did not feel greater bitterness against Lady Sophie for her part in my tragedy. But I told myself, sadly, that I could forgive her, because I had not to tear her image from my heart, leaving wounds that must bleed for ever. There were other roots that had gone deeper, and they—but I turned my mind back to the crude question of money.

There was my little store of jewelery in the morocco case, and the string of pearls also, which I had flung down on the dressing-table, after wearing it to-night. But these things had come from Sir George, though they had posed as presents from Lady Sophie. I saw now that my suspicions should have been roused long ago by such gifts from a woman who never ceased to bemoan her poverty. I could not make use of the jewels, but thankfully I remembered certain other possessions, comparatively insignificant, yet enough, perhaps, for the present emergency. And afterwards might come the deluge, for all I cared.

Once I had admired an old-fashioned ring, containing a sapphire and a few small diamonds, which Lady Sophie sometimes wore. Next day she had insisted on transferring it to me, saying it was too tight.

There was also a red enamelled watch, a brooch of curiously twisted gold, and a bangle with a pearl and ruby butterfly. These trifles had been Lady Sophie's;

Sir George Seaforth had never owned part or lot in them.

I would have kept all, if I could, in tribute to such affection as I could still cherish for Lady Sophie. But they formed the only key with which I might unlock my prison door and go out to freedom. So, collecting the articles together, I was ready to write "Finis," and close the book ended so abruptly.

Only half an hour had passed since I had been left alone. It would be some time yet before I should be missed. I could stop and write a letter, if I liked —a letter to Lady Sophie, or a few words to George Seaforth, which might burn in his recollection for many a day to come.

For a moment I was tempted, but something seemed to tell me that it would be better not. Lady Sophie would understand. She might tell her principal in the plot what she chose.

How to escape without being seen, that was the next question upon which I must strive to concentrate my aching brain. I did not know my way about the house; once outside my room, at any moment I must stand the chance of meeting someone who would wonder at seeing me, lately clad in rosy tulle ("the colour of love," Lady Sophie had called it), now in travelling clothes.

CHAPTER XXII

"THEN YOU'LL REMEMBER ME"

THERE was no advantage to be gained by hesitation, and after the first agitated pause on my own threshold, I closed the door and walked with apparent boldness along the corridor.

Presently came a turn. I let it lead me, and found a stairway which I had not seen before. Hurrying down, I saw a door that opened into dimness. Footsteps were coming, voices speaking together. I thought I recognised Adèle's.

Quickly I darted into the room opposite, noticing only one feature—a long window open to the floor. It invited me, and I stepped out. The worst was over now.

The leisured moon of late July had not yet risen, but a silver haze on the low-lying mass of eastern clouds heralded a coming event, and stars hung thickly in a net of tree branches. I could see flower-beds that made the night sweet with fragrance of mignonette. I could see shrubbery, and tall, black trees, with arms outstretched against the silvery blue, and I divined the vague whiteness of a winding path.

Behind me rose the long, irregular outline of the house, its windows flashing light. The rippling notes

of a piano floated out to me. I recognised Lady Forth's clear soprano voice, and imagined a tall man, with a serious, sun-burned face, turning the leaves of her music.

A sharp, almost intolerable pang smote me. It was my favourite song, "Then You'll Remember Me," that old-fashioned, ever new-fashioned appeal that Sir George Seaforth had liked to hear me sing. "When other hearts——" I put my fingers in my ears, and ran from the following words in the direction which I trusted would take me to the gates.

Lady Forth's voice died away. With it seemed to break the last remaining thread which bound me to the past. Presently I came to a lodge, not the one which we had seen as we drove in earlier in the day. The large gates were locked, but there was a little one for foot-passengers at the side, and it was only latched. A few seconds more and I was out in the road.

I began now to dwell upon the thought that "they" —I worded it no more definitely than that—would perhaps try to trace me, and bring me back to the life I was leaving.

It would be ignominious to be found. All the wretchedness would have to come over again, for I should never consent to do that which I might be asked to do.

Lady Sophie would look at my dresses left behind, and would at once be able to inform herself which one I had worn in going away, for she knew my wardrobe well. Maybe I should then be described, with the

clothes in which I had disappeared, to the local police, and a reward would be offered for discovering my whereabouts. That reward should never be earned if I could prevent it!

"They" would begin the search at the railway-station, no doubt, and my first thought must be to thwart them there. I would walk all night, I said to myself, and perhaps in the early morning I might find some cottager who, bribed to keep my secret, would give me shelter.

I could tell the east by the pearly moon-glimmer spreading behind the trees, and I chose the direction which led away from the station. The road I took would not matter so much, I decided, as the avoidance of observation.

When I had walked for more than an hour I was able to see, by aid of the moonlight, the black hands on the white face of my little enamelled watch. I would part with it only after all the other things were gone, I told myself. The watch indicated midnight, but I was not afraid.

Once I passed a sheet of water, lying under dark trees, with the sheen of the moon across it.

"What if I ended it all here—now?" I whispered in awe, that was partly longing, partly pain.

Youth was still hot in my blood, unsubdued by shame and sorrow; and the thought of death was like a sudden thrust forward, a look down over a black abyss. Yet there was temptation, too. The struggle would be so soon over, and then, when they found me, if they ever did, they would be sorry. George Sea-

forth would realize to the full what he had done, and his punishment would be bitter.

But, after all, it was a weak and obvious thing to court death as the ending to such a tragic drama as mine. How much stronger to fight down the shame, and live to work, that the man who had played with my heart might be paid back every penny spent on his experiment!

That was something to look forward to, to make the thought of the future endurable, though happiness were past. I turned my eyes away from the glittering sheet of steel, and passed on.

At last I was very tired. My shoes were thin, and my feet began to ache—not that it mattered. The moon was still in the sky, but livid with the early dawn; its great yellow face faded white as the sun looked on it. In another mood I might have thought the world beautiful in its first awakening; but I had only a vague impression of trees and meadows—always trees and meadows, and hills in the distance. I wished I could spy smoke curling from the chimney of a cottage; but no human habitation was in sight.

By-and-by, as I walked on, slowly and more slowly now, something stirred in the distance. A couple of gipsy vans were moving up from a slight hollow, on a wide sea of heathery common that found its limitatations at a white beach of road.

I waited; here was a chance for me. A prudent cottage housewife might be shocked at the sudden apparition of a well-dressed young woman demanding food, shelter, a change of clothing, with promise of secrecy—

and offering jewelery as a reward for all. But to the lawless mind of a gipsy my request might come with irresistible appeal.

Besides, gipsies would not remain stationary, but would be always moving on, going farther away from the place which had been my point of departure. They would be less likely than neighbouring cottagers to see anything which might find its way into the papers, or be discovered and catechized by the police.

An ugly, brown-faced young man and a handsome girl walked beside the first caravan. I stopped them, and made up a plausible-sounding story about having run away from my guardian, who wished to force me into abandoning a career on the stage. I did not want to be seen by anyone. Would they let me ride inside their caravan?

I had no money, but I would gladly give them this (holding out the gold twisted brooch); and if the young woman were willing to spare me a hat and dress, I should be delighted to leave her mine in their place; only she must promise to keep faith with me, and mention the circumstances of our meeting to no one.

The girl agreed to both my proposals, with the enthusiastic concurrence of her companion. I could trust the word of the Romany, she said; and I did my best to believe her.

I was supplied with food inside the caravan, and, despite the weight of misery, I ate, hating myself because that senseless engine, my body, demanded stoking with black bread and greasy tea.

I slept, too, though I would have denied the possibility of sleep had anyone suggested it. Noon had passed when I woke, greatly wondering for a moment of bewilderment at my strange surroundings.

After all, we had not gone as far as I had hoped, for gipsy caravans travel but slowly. We were near a village, however, and my dark young hostess consented to buy me a thick veil of blue or green gauze.

Later in the afternoon the exchange of clothing was effected. I clad myself in a bright Scotch plaid, which had been the Romany girl's holiday frock. There was also a sunburnt hat, with a yellow ribbon tied round it, seldom worn on the blue-black hair, which rebelled against constraint; and the veil recently procured effectually completed the disguise.

I do not think when I stepped out of the caravan that my best friend (if I had a friend) or my worst enemy (easy to designate) would have said, "There is Consuelo Brand."

My escort left me within half a mile of a railway station. The nearest town was called Chansey.

I had been informed on inquiry that Chansey was upon the London and South-Western line. I was glad of anything, for my brain had not been idle during my waking hours, and I had decided to make use of a kindly offer which had once been made.

Selfishly, during the full weeks that had passed to the strains of rich music, I had more than half forgotten plain Miss Smith and her eccentric goodness to me. But with equal selfishness—the selfishness that is an integral part of human nature, alas!—I remem-

bered now that it seemed advantageous to remember.

Miss Smith had announced that she had "taken a fancy" to me. She said that if ever I needed a friend I was to write or go to her. I had for a time preserved the card which she had given me that day, and though the highly-glazed bit of pasteboard had now either been lost or was lying in some unregarded nook in my room at Park Lane, the address had been so simple that I was able, after a little effort, to recall it, "Miss Jane Smith, The Pines, Lull, Dorsetshire."

The time had come when, as the elderly spinster had grimly prognosticated, my brilliant bubble had burst, and of all things I needed a friend.

It might be, as I imagined Miss Smith to be a person of some influence in her own section of the country, that she could and would help me along the steep road towards writing that five or six hundred pound cheque—now the flitting light which led me through the darkness and the marsh.

I was going to-day to Miss Smith at the Pines, in the Dorsetshire village of Lull.

My ring, sold by a happy thought to the gipsies at the last moment, had brought me five pounds. No doubt they would obtain almost twice that sum if they chose to part with it later; but with my eccentric costume and lack of self-confidence, I should have had difficulty in getting rid of the jewel in exchange for a railway-ticket.

It would have turned tragedy into pathos if I had been arrested on a charge of attempting to dispose of

stolen property, and I should have been at a loss to defend myself.

I bought a third-class ticket, and set forth on my journey to Lull. So far I felt certain that I had contrived to cover my track with skill. Lady Sophie would never find me now. She would send to Peckham if she cared to bring me back, I reflected; and she would learn nothing there.

Suddenly, with the thought of Cousin Sarah East, and Jimmy, and the others at Happiholme Villa, came a darting prick of recollection. The escritoire! I had left it unsearched, the drawers scattered on the floor. What Diana had had to tell had banished from my mind all remembrance of the errand which had originally taken me upstairs.

Anyone who knew of the secret drawer and the papers could have entered, the moment I left, and robbed me of that which might in happier circumstances have been of infinite value. Perhaps Diana had not gone, after all, but had waited, hidden, to watch me and see what I did. She had expected me to run away, therefore she might well have laid her plans beforehand, counting on my departure.

For the first time since last night my thoughts turned from present misery to a subject unconnected with it. I desperately resented the idea of Diana Dunbar profiting by my humiliation, my absence; and my pulses leaped with the recollection of my own words: "I have found the drawer, and taken away the papers," I had falsely told her, moved by the impulse which had goaded me to speak.

She had believed; and there was hope that henceforth the desk might appear valueless to her and those into whose hands she had played. I was glad of this, not only for the triumph of thwarting my enemy, but because, if I could ever find out what the desk had contained, there might be a legacy coming to me, which would materially help with the cheque.

What would become of the escritoire, now that I was gone? I anxiously asked myself. Would Sir George keep it? would he give it to Lady Sophie? I wished that I could guess, and, in my new excitement, for one moment I was able to forget what a blank the world had become.

Whatever happened to the desk, I almost dared to hope that it would be safe from the machinations of the Dunbar faction. They believed I had the papers. Why, then, in future I should be the object of their pursuit!

This was a startling alternative, for it suggested the fear now that I might have been followed. I had not thought until now of the danger that I might be tracked by others than my quondam friends.

If Diana had stayed to spy! I recalled a rustling among the shrubbery at Southwood Park as I had passed. I had been frightened at the moment, but had reassured myself later with the reflection that some small wild creature of the night had been lurking there.

It was morbid to fancy now that it could have been anything more formidable, I decided. I had safely eluded friends and enemies alike.

From Chansey, in Surrey, to Lull, in Dorsetshire, is a long journey; and there was a change of trains. I had started soon after four, and it was nine when a porter at Lull directed me to Miss Smith's place. The Pines was a house of some importance in his eyes at least, it seemed, for he spoke of it and its mistress with respect.

I should have a walk of nearly two miles beyond the village, I was informed, and the porter had a fancy that Miss Smith was not at home. Perhaps that would not matter to me, however. Probably he supposed me to be a new servant maid, with a queer taste in dress, arriving to take a situation.

My heart sank with an additional weight. Miss Smith's problematical absence did matter considerably to me. Late as it was, I had doubted whether to dare present myself at The Pines that night, and now I was sure that I must wait till morning. I thanked the porter for his information, pressed a few coppers into his not reluctant palm, and—failed to satisfy his curiosity.

Without telling him whether or no I regretted the doubt that shrouded Miss Smith's movements, I walked away, and presently coming to an unpretentious inn, I requested shelter for the night.

In the pocket of the gipsy's frock, tied up in a handkerchief, there remained several pounds and numerous shillings, over and above the price of my journey, from the proceeds of the ring. I produced from this store as much as would pay for a room at the inn, and was somewhat unwillingly received as a lodger.

My bed was hard, and the thoughts that disturbed my rest were harder, so that I could do nothing but toss and moan through the dark, endless hours of the night. I was up betimes, physically refreshed by breakfast, and on my way to The Pines.

If Miss Smith had been out last evening, she was the sort of woman to return home early, I argued, so that I might hope she would not be late in sleeping off her fatigue to-day. She would be surprised to see me, still more surprised at my conception of a travelling costume, but my explanations would soon soften the shock produced by the red and yellow plaid.

The Pines was a finer place than I had been led to expect from Miss Smith's description, but I remembered that she had frankly advertised herself as a rich woman, considered by her sister-in-law eminently worth conciliation.

A few months ago, before grand houses had lost their awe-inspiring quality for me, I should have been exceedingly impressed by Miss Smith's residence as I walked up the drive to attack knocker and bell.

A woman in neat cap and apron opened the door, staring at the unique apparition in undisguised amazement, tinged with disapproval.

"Is Miss Smith at home?" I inquired, with such dignity as a vain woman who knows herself at a disadvantage can command. My vanity was in dust and ashes now; still, self-consciousness enough was left to make me writhe a little under the spinster's servant's glare.

"No, Miss Smith is not at home," she promptly

answered. "And let me tell you, my young woman, you might have spared me trouble by coming to the back-door."

Crushed, I nevertheless persisted.

"I am a friend of Miss Smith's," I said mildly. "I am very sorry she is out. But——"

"She is not only out. She is away," corrected my informant.

"Oh!" I could scarcely repress a little gasp of consternation, for I had staked my all on finding Miss Smith ready to carry out her offer. "Will she be away long?"

"She may be back to-morrow; she may not be back for a week."

"Is she still in London—with Mrs. Leatherby-Smith?" I asked, anxious to win confidence by showing my knowledge of the family connections.

It had not previously occurred to me that she might be lingering in town, for Miss Smith had impressed me as a woman who knew her own mind, and she had told me that her visit to her sister-in-law was to be a short one. Still, it was possible——

"No; she's not in London," returned the maid, shutting her mouth over an iron resolution not to betray her mistress to a creature in a red plaid, and a hat with a soiled yellow band. "I can't tell you where she is, any more than I can tell you when she's coming back."

Evidently my bids to inspire confidence had not succeeded. I was regarded as a brazen fraud, who had picked up a few bits of family history and patched them together for my own doubtful purposes.

The woman ostentatiously took a step back from the door, which moved an inch or two towards shutting. This to the beautiful Miss Brand, who had been welcome a few days ago in what the society papers call the "best houses in England!"

How was my greatness fallen! and what a feather-weight, what a nothing-masquerading-as-something, it had been at best! Still, my poor little past vanities appeared pitifully pathetic to me now, rather than darkly sinful, as perhaps they ought to have seemed.

I had no more questions to ask. Murmuring inarticulately, I bowed my head to the inevitable and walked away. The door closed upon the respectable comfort of Miss Smith's home, and the waif in the red plaid atrocity knew not where she was to go.

After I had passed through the gates which had proved inhospitable to me, I walked on aimlessly for a long time, hardly conscious, save for a vague additional sense of wretchedness, that a drizzle of rain was falling.

At first I could not make up my mind what to do, since the straw I had caught at to save me from drowning had been snatched from my grasp. I was afraid to go back to London and apply to an agency for a situation, as I had once planned to do, in case I should ever be driven out of fairyland. I had not had a prophetic soul in those seemingly remote days, for I had never dreamed of the way in which my decree of banishment would fall.

At worst I had pictured Lady Sophie de Gretton capriciously tiring of her guest, and intimating gently

that it was time for flitting. If this had happened, I should have thanked her, and obediently disappeared into the *Ewigkeit.* But now it appeared to my sore self-consciousness that there could be no peaceful twilight of obscurity for me. Every eye turned carelessly upon my face would remain fixed in recognition of the battered celebrity fallen off its pedestal.

Lady Sophie would find me out; she would hear of me. I dared not go so near her world as London. I did not want to do the cowardly thing I had thought of last night. What was to become of me?

CHAPTER XXIII

"WANTED IMMEDIATELY"

"SHE may be back to-morrow; she may not be back for a week."

The words of Miss Smith's servant rang again in my mind, and a ray of hope gleamed out to me with the sudden thought that I might stay and wait for her.

I had money left which would keep me for some time if I found cheap lodgings, and that should not be difficult in this country. The boom of the sea came on the wind when one's heart was stilled to listen, and there must be fishermen's cottages not far away.

I would write to Miss Smith, hoping that my letter might be forwarded from The Pines. I would write also to Anne, who could be trusted to keep my secret, asking her what news of the spinster had lately come to Holland Park House.

This new idea gave me something to do, something to keep the thoughts that must not be harboured out of my brain. I walked with increased briskness to the village, and purchased at one of the shops several necessary articles, to supply my suspicious lack of luggage. I also bought a dark sailor hat, and material for the creation of a decent black frock, actually experiencing dim stirrings of pleasure in the anticipation

of renewing remembered makeshifts in sempstressing. Armed with my acquisitions, their newness concealed in the depths of a cheap travelling-bag, I found the colony of fishermen I had hoped for—a little cluster of picturesque antiquity half a mile inland from crowding black rocks that rose above the white foam of the sea.

Lodgings were advertised in more than one small peephole window, and I chose to knock at the door of a dwelling with a gay strip of flower-garden in front. I had guessed that the housewife there would be clean and capable, but my weary imagination had not conjured up anything so wholesome, so motherly and sweet as the reality.

She gazed with kindness upon my tired, unveiled face; but even with her the red plaid was against me, and the price she named for her rooms was not as cheap as I had expected.

"I'm afraid I must look somewhere else," I said wistfully, hoping that she might be moved to strike off a few shillings.

"I'm sorry," the answer came, half doubtfully; "but, you see, we can easily get what we ask, specially in August, and we often has gentry here."

I was not "gentry." This fact was so self-evident to her that it had not occurred to the kindly heart that I could be offended at the implication. Nor was I offended, but I wanted to stay with her; I did not want to "look somewhere else."

Suddenly the sense of my forlornness overwhelmed me like a wave. The world that was so cold to me

was filled with a great mother-want that ached and ached in my heart, with the longing for arms to fold round me in love, some bosom which would give me rest.

Tears burst from my eyes. They did not fall gently, one by one, but came in a storm. My face worked with the piteous, childish contortions that will come with passionate crying.

I stammered "Good-day," and hurried off to hide my weakness and my woe, but the housewife ran after me.

"Why, you poor little body! Why, dearie, dontee, dontee, now! And you *shall* stop!" she exclaimed.

I think her hand was on the reprehensible plaid, detaining me, pulling me back inside the low doorway. But everything was blurred with tears. Presently I was crying on her shoulder. She smelled of freshly-washed linen and newly-baked bread.

Over the shoulder I saw, through a mist, shelves of blue and pictorial china, a tall clock with red flowers painted round its face. A dark patch of shadow indicated kitchen range and low mantel, ornamented with spotted dogs and wonderful vases.

A glitter, like jewels, meant pewter and copper things depending from hooks; and there was a yellow cat that purred, and regarded me with an unblinking topaz stare.

"You shall pay what you can, poor pretty dear," said the kind creature, who was doing more for me, according to her lights, than Lady Sophie de Gretton had ever done.

Thereupon she dried my eyes with a clean coarse towel that hung before the fire, petted me and patted me, and bustled about to get me a glass of milk and a seed cake. I had always hated caraway seeds before that day, but I knew that in future I should love them for this woman's sake.

"You are good to me," I sobbed; "I'm so lonely; I've run away from home, and—and I can never go back."

"Deary me, poor child! I 'ope you didn't run away to marry a young man, and he threw you over. There's some of 'em like that."

"On the contrary, I've run away from a young man," I explained, with a queer little smile through the tears that had brought me relief.

I drank the milk and ate the cake, and it was arranged that I should occupy Mrs. Nye's spare bedroom and the sitting-room attached for the modest sum of six shillings a week.

I could not tell her how long I was likely to stay. It might be for a week, it might be indefinitely. But I mentioned that I was anxious to obtain work. Sometimes situations were advertised in the local newspaper, she cheeringly informed me. Her husband took it in; it was published once a week, and a friend of theirs lent them a London daily paper, too. I should see both, and who could tell but I might find exactly the thing I wanted? Meanwhile she would take the best of care of me, and "mother me up a bit."

Half an hour later, in a neat little sitting-room, smelling of the late roses on the table—with a faint,

undertone of mustiness—and deadly portaits of departed Nyes staring down at me from the walls, I sat writing to Miss Smith and to Anne Bryden.

I merely informed Miss Smith that I had left Lady Sophie de Gretton, and was thrown upon my own resources. If, when she came home, she would remember her kind promise to befriend me, and help me to obtain work of any kind, I should be most grateful. I was to be found waiting for her return at Mrs. Nye's cottage, near Lull; and Mrs. Nye said that everyone knew her Thomas, the best fisherman along the Dorsetshire coast.

To Anne I was more confidential. I could not bring myself to tell her all the miserable details which made up the truth; but I said that I feared my new friends had not been quite sincere with me; that I had left Lady Sophie, and requested that Anne would tell nobody where I was. I was very unhappy, but hoped to feel better and less restless if I could find an occupation.

It would be kind of her if she would write me everything she knew regarding Miss Smith's whereabouts, for venturing to rely upon that lady's promise, I was waiting in her neighbourhood, in the hope of her speedy return. I also begged, in a hesitating postscript, that if any items of news concerning the movements of Lady Sophie de Gretton, the Dunbars, or Sir George Seaforth, reached Anne's ears, she would remember them for my benefit.

And so still another phase of life opened for me, or perhaps it would be better to call it existence. From

the whirl of a London season to the four walls of a Dorsetshire fisherman's cottage—can a more strongly marked contrast be imagined?

Mrs. Nye's kindness was the only balm which Fate gave to the wounds my spirit had suffered. Yet it was balm, and by its means I was saved from many intolerable moments. It seems puerile in the telling, but the making of my black dress also helped me. Cutting it out and sewing up the seams kept me from thinking forbidden thoughts, through hours that otherwise must have been dark indeed.

When the frock was finished and I had donned it in place of the objectionable plaid, Mrs. Nye gazed at me in flattering contemplation.

"Why, dearie, I always knew you was a beauty, but now I can see you are a lady, too," she ejaculated, leaving me to be pleased or offended as I might elect.

Three days passed in a monotonous round, which seemed broken only by the striking of the tall clock —audible all over the cottage—and the coming of meal-times. I heard nothing from Miss Smith, but on the fourth morning a letter came from Anne. Even the London postmark excited me and set my heart beating.

The envelope was addressed to "Miss Constance Burns," as I had requested, and I felt as if I were breaking the seal of a communication addressed to a stranger.

"My dear Con," Anne began. She had usually opened with "My Pet," "Dearest Girlie," or something else pleasantly caressing, so that now, when all

my heart cried out for sympathy, the three short words struck me as bald and conventional.

"I am sorry to hear that you are in trouble," the letter went on; "but I think that you were born lucky, and things are bound to come right for you in the end, so that I don't feel as sorry for you as I otherwise should. You are wise to wait for Miss Smith, I fancy. She and Mrs. L.-S. are not on the best of terms at present, so that the latter is not in the secret of her excursion. But Miss Smith has another estate in Yorkshire, which she lets by the year, and I remember that the tenants are leaving about this time.

"The fussy old lady has probably gone on there to personally conduct the move, or see that the house is in 'apple-pie' order for the next incumbents to come in. She is almost sure to turn up at The Pines again shortly, as she hates being away from her cats and dogs, and, above all, the monkey. I should think, if you played your cards well, you might get taken on as a sort of nursery-governess to that monkey. Let me know when you have any more news.

"Yours affectionately,

"ANNE."

Not a word as to my questions about those I had left. Such a stiff, cold little letter! I could not understand it. I did not see what I could have done to displease my old friend.

* * * * * * *

"Look here, miss, what I've found for you!" said Mrs. Nye on the fifth day of our acquaintance,

She brought in my breakfast of bread-and-milk, a newspaper tucked under her arm, and when she had set down the tray she eagerly opened out the pages of the local journal.

"There's a splendid advertisement," she exclaimed, finding the wished-for paragraph with a plump, work-worn finger. "Just the thing for you, and right in our neighbourhood, too."

She stood, breathing hard, waiting with arms akimbo until I could read the few lines and give my verdict.

"WANTED, immediately, a young lady to act as secretary and read aloud a few hours each day to an elderly gentleman who is blind. Holiday, if required, for two months each year, but lady would during remainder of time live in employer's house. Duties light. Salary large to the right applicant.—Apply at once, if possible, in person to the residence of the advertiser, Arrish Hall, Swanage Road, Lull."

"It must be close to the village," I exclaimed.

"No miss, not quite close; that is to say, it's a matter of two mile or more. Miss Smith's place, The Pines, is the nearest house, and that's all but a mile this side. Arrish Hall has been to let furnished this long time—seven or eight years. Folks used to say 'twas haunted, but that's all nonsense, of course; you and me don't believe in them things. Still, the house does stand a bit lonely, that can't be denied. Not that it matters for a blind gentleman. The lonelier the better, he'd say, maybe. He must be lately come in;

I hadn't heard the place was let. 'Tis a wonder Tom didn't know, for 'tisn't much slips past him in the way of news."

"It sounds attractive," I meditated aloud. "But there'll be so many trying for the place that it doesn't seem much use for me to apply—a stranger, without references."

"The paper's only just out this morning, miss," urged Mrs. Nye. "You'll have as good a chance as anyone, right on the spot as you are; not so many can have been before you. I suppose the gentleman preferred somebody living in the neighbourhood, or he wouldn't have put his advertisement in our local paper and nowhere else that I've seen as yet, anyhow."

"Well, I'll walk to Arrish Hall and try my luck," I said dubiously, "though I don't for a moment think I'll get the place."

"A pity the gentleman can't see you," Mrs. Nye regretted. "But, then, there's your voice, miss, and his ears seem to be all right."

An hour later I was on my way along the country road which I had been told would lead me eventually to Arrish Hall, the lonely house about which "folks" had talked so much "nonsense." I wore my neat new dress of black alpaca, with white turnover collar and cuffs, and the plain black sailor hat I had obtained in the village, looking, I flattered myself, like the respectable young nursery-governess out of a situation which, after all, I actually was.

In this costume I might hope, it seemed to me,

for at least a more favourable reception at the door than I had experienced at Miss Smith's, whatever fate lay in store for me within.

I passed The Pines, and gazed wistfully towards the house, which was just visible among the trees. The blinds in the front-windows were all at "half-mast," so to speak; no doubt the mistress was still away.

It would be foolish to miss the smallest chance of obtaining an engagement simply because I still cherished some vague hope that Miss Smith might be willing to redeem her promise when she should return. I should have been glad, nevertheless, if the advertisement which I was now on my way to answer need not have appeared until after I knew definitely what I had to expect from the kindly, eccentric spinster.

As matters stood, however, there was nothing for me to do save what I was doing; and doubtless if Miss Smith were at home to advise she would counsel me to take the position at Arrish Hall, if I were fortunate enough to get it. Besides, though it was most unlikely that I would be so fortunate, I should at worst have the satisfaction of feeling that I had done my best—that I had "left no stone unturned."

The distance after passing The Pines began to seem long. It was all uphill, and the sun of noon was hot on my head. The country was lonelier here. Miss Smith's property and the Arrish Hall estate adjoined, so that there were no houses between.

Miss Smith's meadows were well cultivated, suggesting English peace and comfort, but the land belonging to Arrish Hall—separated from The Pines by

a high wall of ancient, many-tinted lichened bricks—was desolate from long neglect. Oaks and pines crowded beeches and smaller trees, all untrimmed and out of order.

The dwelling was invisible from the road; it was a house in an enchanted forest. Here the Sleeping Beauty might have lain for her century of charmed slumber, I somewhat sentimentally told myself, enmeshed by fairy barriers, hidden from the world.

The fact that the place had been handicapped by a grim reputation would account for its condition; but now that it was tenanted again, after years of emptiness, everything would, no doubt, be changed. Even though the new occupant was a blind man, he would take a certain pride in his possessions, and retrieve them from the curse of desolation.

I entered by way of a rusty iron gate between tall stone pillars bearing a half-defaced coat of arms. The drive was grass-grown, and wound into green distance under a low-hanging canopy of beeches. It must have been almost a quarter of a mile, I fancied, in finishing its windings with abruptness before an old Elizabethan house.

The door-bell, as I timidly pulled it startled me by the loud jangling peal it sent out echoing and re-echoing with a curious impression of emptiness through the house. I felt myself flushing; I did not seem an important enough person to have dared make so much noise.

I had not long to wait for admittance. A middle-aged man-servant, who looked more like a self-re-

specting valet than a butler or footman, opened the door after a short delay, and invited me into a square hall, sparsely and dingily furnished.

"I have called in answer to an advertisement in the *Lull Herald,*" I explained, not without stammering a little.

"Yes, madam," responded the servant. "Will you kindly sit down and wait here for a few minutes? We have only just moved in, and are not quite in order yet. My master is engaged with another lady, but I think that he will shortly be ready to receive you."

"Engaged in engaging the other lady most likely," I commented mentally. "He will only receive me for the purpose of politely regretting that the situation he offered is already filled.

My hopes stirred faintly again, however, when the distant ringing of a bell having summoned the servant away, he returned to show "the other lady" out. She was of a certain age, pinched, with prim lips that looked as if a thin, shrill voice might be meagrely cushioned behind them.

Scarcely had she departed, when a third candidate reached the door, which had not yet closed after her rival. But it was my turn to try for favour first, and while she reluctantly availed herself of my forsaken chair, I was led away through the wide hall, down a narrow corridor. My conductor tapped lightly at a door.

"Come in," was murmured on the other side, and "Miss Burns" was duly announced.

The room was so dark, with its half-drawn curtains and lowered blinds, that, after the brighter light of the region, I had left, for a moment or two I could make out nothing save the outlines of a bowed and seated figure.

"Pardon my not rising, Miss Burns," whispered an odd voice, suggesting a defective palate or a mouth full of pebbles. "I am a sad invalid, lame as well as deprived of that greatest physical blessing, sight. Will you draw a chair near me?"

I took one, which had evidently been placed in position by the latest comer. The master of Arrish Hall sat with his bent back to such light as filtered through the curtains, while I faced it. I fancied that his blindness must be of the kind which renders light painful to his nerves, though the sense of sight be gone; for not only did he court darkness in the room, but his eyes were covered with a large green shade, beginning under the thatch of long, snow-streaked dark hair, and so shadowing the features of the wearer that nothing above the end of his nose was visible. Below fell a heavy beard, that flowed over the breast —black, tufted here and there with white, in startling contrast.

In his hand he held a gold-headed cane, and he was clad in a remarkable dressing-gown of silk, whose barbaric embroidery said "India" in hieroglyphics. On a stool before him a bandaged foot was stretched stiffly out. The owner of Arrish Hall appeared to be a man greatly afflicted, for apparently his sufferings were complicated by gout.

I imparted the perhaps unnecessary information that I had called in answer to his advertisement. As I began to speak, he started and bent forward, as if eagerly listening.

"Ah, that voice!" he exclaimed. "It is what I have longed for. Miss—er—Burns, will you kindly take up a book—any book—from the table, which I think is near you, and read half a page aloud?"

I obeyed, and began reading at random from Meredith's "Diana of the Crossways."

Presently I was gently bidden to cease.

"It is enough," said the master of Arrish Hall. "You could have attempted no more difficult task in reading aloud than from George Meredith, who reveals his choicest meanings at first sight to but a favoured few. You are one of the few. Your voice is a rare possession—a rich jewel. You sing, also—a trained voice?"

"My mother trained it," I replied impulsively. "She sang more beautifully than anyone I ever heard," I added.

"You must sing for me—later. That is, if you are willing to accept the position I am able to offer. The housekeeper will show you the suite of rooms selected for my secretary; I hope they will be found convenient. The salary I thought of naming is eighty pounds a year, payable quarterly, the first quarter in advance. You would be required to write and read for me during the morning, perhaps also for an hour in the afternoon. In the evening I should be glad of a few songs after dinner—perhaps a little poetry. The rest of the

time would be your own. Will you come to me, and if so, how soon?"

Would I come to him? This was a very different way of putting it from what I had expected. No questions asked, no references required. I ought to have been delighted; but—perhaps it was the cold twilight and the musty smell of the big room, with its faded furnishings, that had disheartened me—I felt vaguely miserable.

I did not let my stupid depression interfere, however, with a speedy snapping-up of the luck which had befallen me. Eighty pounds a year! Why, with economy, I might easily send sixty to Sir George Seaforth at the end of the first year, and so on, until he was repaid for his "experiment," so costly to me as well as to him.

I lost no time in announcing that I could come next morning, or even that same night if necessary. Mr. Raynor—it appeared that my employer's name was Raynor—preferred the latter arrangement, and so it was settled.

I stayed for a few moments longer, discussing details of future occupation, learning that the new master of Arrish Hall had spent most of his life in India, and had come to Dorsetshire because his doctor had recommended sea-air and complete quiet; then—veiling the light of triumph on my face as I passed the waiting candidate, for whom disappointment was in store—I was shown out of the front-door.

The distance did not seem so long now, nor the heat so great. I walked more briskly, planning ways

and means to speed the sending of that cheque, to increase its size by diligent economy. I was no happier than I had been on the night that I fled from Southwood Park; my wrongs rankled as deeply now as then, but I had an incentive. I was buoyed by the hope of administering punishment—a mean, unworthy hope, perhaps; but it would scarcely have been natural if in a week the desire to make the sinner suffer as he had made me suffer should have been superseded by softer feelings.

I had only passed the gates of The Pines by a few yards when I was obliged to step out of the way of an approaching brougham. A face looked out at me; it was "plain Miss Smith's."

I uttered a slight exclamation of surprise, which was echoed by one from her. She had recognized me, and, what was more, she was calling me by name, not the new name, with which I had hardly made myself familiar yet, but the old one—Consuelo Brand.

"What are you doing here?" inquired the spinster, when the brougham had been stopped and I had obeyed her beckoning summons to the window.

"Then you didn't get my letter?"

I answered her question by another.

"Haven't had a letter from a human soul for a fortnight. Gave orders not to have any forwarded. I've been dissipating, my girl. Went on the Continent for the first time in my life. To tell the truth, my idea was to see the eye-doctor in Wiesbaden that everybody goes to. I had a scare about my sight, but he laughed at me, and told me I wanted stronger

spectacles, that was all. I made the mistake of forgeting I was growing old. In my relief I was inclined to remain on the Continent for some time. I did remain, and I think I shall occasionally repeat the experiment. I wish you had been with me. Are you and your Lady Sophonisba, or whatever her name is, visiting in these parts, or are you free to come with me to lunch?"

"Lady Sophie de Gretton and I have parted," I exclaimed, vividly blushing. "I'm lodging in a fisherman's cottage at present; in future I'm to be secretary to a gentleman at Arrish Hall, but for the moment I am free to go anywhere you are willing to take me."

"Then get in and tell the coachman to drive on," directed Miss Smith.

By the time we had reached the house door at The Pines I had, without taking her entirely into my confidence, told my companion with what hopes I had come, when I found myself in need of a friend, to Dorsetshire.

"And you did quite right, too. It's my boast that I'm a woman of my word," she had just responded as the door was thrown open by the superior maid who had pulverized my vanity during my former call.

Her face when she beheld me entering the house in familiar converse with Miss Smith was a study. She even looked somewhat alarmed; but I had not told tales out of school, and she was safe from her mistress so far as I was concerned.

On Miss Smith's desk, in a room ambitiously named "the study," reposed my letter among others; and

when the spinster had greeted her monkey and a bevy of other pets, she insisted on reading it as a sort of preface to my explanations.

"Can't you get out of going to this man Raynor, and come to me instead?" she asked abruptly.

"I'm afraid not," I said. "It wouldn't be very honourable, would it? You see, it is my fault that he has told other people his arrangements are already made, and if I went back upon the arrangement now I might cause him a great deal of trouble, poor old man! Though there isn't any written contract, and though the whole affair has been conducted on both sides in a very unbusinesslike way, I feel bound in honour."

"I suppose you'll have to carry out your bargain, then," sighed Miss Smith. "And you're right, no doubt. Only it is rather trying that I should have come home just too late. I told you in London that I liked you, and I tell you so again in Dorsetshire. It would please me very much to have your face where I could look at it whenever I wanted to. I was on the point of giving you an invitation to come here and stop with me as long as you chose, that day at my sister-in-law's, when in sailed Lady Sophonisba, and snatched you away from under my nose. Now it's this Raynor man—this goodness-knows-what—who has taken that old ghost-trap, Arrish Hall. You're not superstitious, evidently, my dear, or you wouldn't be found dead living there—as an Irishman would say."

"Not, I'm not superstitious," I returned. "Besides,

beggars mustn't be choosers; though, of course, I should have been much happier if I could have stopped for a time with you."

"Well, I shouldn't have paid you eighty pounds a year, my child. I consider the man is throwing money away on you, though it's an ill wind that blows nobody good; and I dare say you're pleased to get it."

I admitted that I was pleased, though I did not confess why I cared so much, so very much; and, after all, I began to think that I had done well in answering the advertisement.

"Run over and see me every day if you can, when you are settled down at Arrish Hall," said Miss Smith, when, after luncheon, I was ready to depart. "I certainly can't go to you, or folks would be putting it round that I was setting my cap at this old widower, or bachelor, or whatever he is. Good-bye, and remember that if you don't like your place, there's another one open to you."

Mrs. Nye, while expressing herself as sorry to lose the "sweetest face she'd ever had inside her house," congratulated me on my luck and helped me to pack. My luggage did not necessitate the expense of a cab —every shilling saved was to go towards the great sum—but my good landlady would not permit that I should carry it. Thomas Nye should see to that, and glad he would be to do anything for Miss Burns. I could just go in by myself, with my hands crossed, and leave the rest to him.

There were tears in my eyes when I bade the kind

woman good-bye at last, though three miles or so was not a formidable distance; and I am not ashamed to tell that I kissed her.

I did not start until after I had had my supper—with an extra dish, and a few home-made cakes to put in my bag, as a present from Mrs. Nye—for I did not wish to arrive at Arrish Hall until after my employer had dined.

My breakfast and luncheon were to be served to me alone in my own sitting-room at my new home; but dinner was to be eaten in state, with the companionship of Mr. Raynor; and this ordeal had seemed too much for the first night of residence.

The same servant I had seen in the morning let me in again in the evening, when I had found my way up through the shadows of the avenue to the old hall. Mr. Raynor had hoped to greet me, I was informed, but a severe attack of gout had driven him early to bed. The housekeeper would show me my rooms—I had not seen them earlier in the day, though Mr. Raynor had seemed half to suggest that I should—and I would not be needed until ten o'clock next morning.

For a few moments I was left alone, standing in the large hall. A hanging lamp of quaint old fashion had been lit, but the dim light it gave seemed only to render darkness more visible, to make the shadows crowd nearer from the corners. The place looked as if it had lain under a ban.

For the first time my thoughts dwelt upon the vague references made by Mrs. Nye and Miss Smith

to the stories told about the house. It was said to be haunted, I knew, and to have stood tenantless for years. I began to wonder, with a slight creepiness running down my back, what were the tales that had kept Arrish Hall empty for so long.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE STORY THAT THE HOUSEKEEPER TOLD

So deeply was I engrossed in thought, that I believed myself to be still alone in the hall, when a voice spoke suddenly close to my ear.

I turned, with a start, and a suppressed exclamation, to see an elderly woman, whose slippered feet had made no noise in their approach.

"Good-evening, miss," she remarked. "I am Mrs. Walsh, Mr. Raynor's housekeeper, and I am asked to show you your rooms."

She was staring at me, blinking and peering from under remarkably full, wrinkled lids, that looked like badly rolled-up blinds, over the dull windows of her eyes. I did not like her face at all. The features were prominent and slightly misshapen by a severe attack of small-pox, which had left her skin deeply pitted, faded to the colour of clay.

Its cadaverous effect was heightened by a dark red front of false hair folded smoothly over the ears, under a smart cap with lavender ribbons. She had keys in her hands—they were knotted, deceitful-looking hands, with incredibly long fingers.

No, I did not think that Mrs. Walsh and I were likely to be friends.

I said something, I hardly knew what, though I tried to make it civil, and followed her out of the hall, through the corridor I had seen in the morning, past the door of the dreary "library," where I had talked with Mr. Raynor, and so upstairs.

At the top Mrs. Walsh lighted a candle among several others in brass sticks on a table. We walked along a narrow passage, which would have been dark save for our candle and a light that came dimly from below. At a door halfway down its length the housekeeper paused.

"Your sitting-room, miss," she announced, with an air of pride.

It was a very good room, as far as size and shape were concerned, and it was evident that some pains had been taken to make it habitable. I was grateful for this, and glanced about with a certain interest.

"It is very kind of Mr. Raynor to give me such a nice room," I said. "He seems to be a great sufferer. Have you been with him long?"

"Oh, no, miss," exclaimed Mrs. Walsh, with an air of surprise. "I never saw Mr. Raynor till a few days ago. I was caretaker here. I'd lived in the house ever since Sir Marmaduke Yorke, who owns the Hall, took a distaste for the place, and went away, leaving it shut up but for me and my son, who's gone to America now. Mr. Raynor came down with a gentleman, and was taken through all the rooms. They were described to him, though he couldn't see. Then he seems to have decided on renting the Hall at once, for within a few hours I got word that he would move

in the first hour of the week, and would keep me on as housekeeper, if I could cook. That was what I was used to in old days. I don't say it isn't a rise for me to be in my present position, but I intend to give satisfaction to Mr. Raynor if I can.

"I've been expecting a batch of his servants down from town," continued Mrs. Walsh; "but the master doesn't wish to have them sent for, it appears, until the place has been got into better shape. Thinks they might find fault and be discontented, I suppose, though what's been good enough for me all these years ought to be good enough for them. And Mr. Jennings, Mr. Raynor's own man, who has come with his master, to make himself generally useful until the others arrive, has not complained of the way he found things in the house. If the rest are anything like him, we shall do very well."

As she talked on, the woman settled her cap and her collar, giving her neat black cashmere gown a pat now and then, which expressed the pride of novelty. If she was repulsive in her respectable, housekeeperly dress, I wondered what she must have been when, free from the obligation to live up to a new position, she had merely been caretaker.

I rather wondered that Mr. Raynor had chosen to keep her on in so responsible a situation, putting her over his own old servants, who were evidently awaiting a summons to flit from a town-house; but I decided that he must have parted with a London incumbent, and been too kind-hearted to dismiss Mrs. Walsh from an old home, where her knowledge of the place

and neighbourhood might perhaps prove to be of more or less use.

"See what a nice new wardrobe Mr. Raynor has had put into your bedchamber for you, miss," the housekeeper went on, pushing wide open a door, which already stood ajar.

There was a faint light on the other side, and I saw that the room into which she led me was lit with gas. All the furniture was old, save the one article to which my guide had referred, and while I appreciated Mr. Raynor's rather unusual consideration for a paid secretary, my sense of humour, still alive, made me smile at the disproportionate size of the huge ark and my one small piece of luggage.

"Lined with cedar, miss, to keep out the moths," the housekeeper explained, revealing the inner recesses of the wardrobe, one side of which was provided with shelves, the other with hooks for hanging garments.

The fragrance of the cedar was agreeable, and I was grateful for my employer's thought for my comfort, though there was scarcely anything which, at present, I needed less than such an article of furniture.

"It only came in this morning early," continued Mrs. Walsh, "with a few other things which the master has had sent down from town—a bath-chair for himself, and such like. He does seem a kind gentleman, as you say. I think you and me will have a very good place here."

Her words put me on a level with herself, and I experienced a faint sense of resentment, not prompted by my vanity, for that was dead or dying, but by my

feeling of dislike for the woman, with her stealthy step and her peering eyes. I made no answer, and, after aimlessly lingering for a moment or two, as if seeking for an excuse to remain, she at last moved slowly across the floor.

"I believe I understood you to say you had had your supper, miss?" she inquired, her lean fingers on the door handle. "Ah, I thought so. Then, I suppose you won't be requiring anything more till to-morrow morning, when your breakfast shall be here in your sitting-room at about half-past eight o'clock. As there's only myself to wait on you, perhaps you'll excuse hot water for your bath, which, as you see, has been put ready overnight. But, of course, if you——"

"Please don't trouble," I said. "I like my bath cold."

"Thank you. I hope you'll sleep well."

She opened the door, but still made no move towards going out.

"You're not timid, I hope?"

Evidently there was something more she wished to say, though she did not quite see how to begin.

"I don't think I'm particularly timid," I answered conservatively.

"It is a good thing you are not nervous," said Mrs. Walsh. "But I suppose if you had been you wouldn't have taken your situation here, for, of course, if you've lived any time in the neighbourhood you must have heard the stories?"

I ought, no doubt, to have answered with dignified reserve that I neither had heard nor wished to hear

the tales to which she referred. But the eerie, irritating fascination of an old house was beginning to grip me. I did not desire to listen to the woman's gossip, yet I could not let her go until I should know what she knew.

"What are the stories?" I found myself questioning, half against my will.

"There's many of them, for Arrish Hall is an old house, and there's been plenty of time for queer things to happen. In one room there's said to be a knocking on the wall, always after midnight. People used to hear it, and wonder, till finally Sir Marmaduke's grandfather had the wall opened, and there was the skeleton of a tall man, dressed as men dressed in the days of Queen Elizabeth. Nobody could find out the story of how he'd been put there, or why; but though the bones were decently buried, and the wall built up again, the knocking didn't stop. It's been heard even of late years.

"But that wasn't the thing that drove Sir Marmaduke away, and kept the house empty since. That was a matter which took place not so very long ago, and gave the Hall an ill name. An uncle of Sir Marmaduke's, who lived here about fifteen or twenty years ago, killed his younger brother, in a dispute over a lady they were both in love with. It happened at night, and next morning the murderer was found quite mad, rubbing out the blood-stains with a curtain he'd torn down. They only guessed how the quarrel had begun by his ravings. He died, a maniac, a few months after, and since then, every Friday night—the

murder was on a Friday—there's that awful sound of rubbing, rubbing, going on and on till the dawn comes.

"At least, Sir Marmaduke thought he heard it, and so did one or two people who came to visit him; and it drove him out of the house. Mr. Raynor's the first tenant, though the place has been to let for eight years. I can't say that I ever heard anything queer myself, which is a pretty good test. But I thought you ought to know, miss, in case there should ever be a noise in the night—which I hope there won't be—that it isn't burglars or anything to hurt you. I hope I've done right, and that I'm not leaving you uncomfortable?"

"Oh, no, not at all uncomfortable," I firmly answered.

But as she bade me good-night, and closed the door, I felt a humiliating impulse to run after her and call her back.

I resisted the temptation; but when I was left alone, and the sound of Mrs. Walsh's soft footsteps had died away along the uncarpeted passage, with its loose and creaky boards, I hesitated with my hand on the key. Should I lock the door, or should I not?

If I had not heard the housekeeper's gruesome gossip, I should certainly have fastened myself into my own domain. But I had absolutely not dared to inquire whether my rooms were the ones in which the ghastly sound of rubbing had been heard by Sir Marmaduke Yorke and his guests; and it seemed to me that, since they were the ones used by the late master of Arrish Hall, he might have had particular reasons for deserting them.

I had never thought myself a coward, and I did not believe in supernatural appearances; yet never before had I been subjected to such a test as the present one, and I did not feel inclined to shut myself away with my doubts from all communication with the rest of the household.

If Mrs. Walsh had unfolded her grim tales in morning sunlight, I should probably not have regarded them seriously; but it was a different thing to be left alone, after dark, in rooms where a murder might have taken place, for all I knew to the contrary. Of course, one room was as good as another, no matter what awful scene might have been enacted there years ago; of course, too, there was no such thing as "haunting;" I should hear nothing, as the night went on, because there would be nothing to hear, and I must not behave like a foolish, frightened child—I, who had serious troubles, and should have passed beyond such sickly superstition.

These mental injunctions I repeated over and over, with more or less encouraging results. Still, I did not lock the door of my sitting-room, which led into the passage; nor did I think that, later, I should lock the door of the bedroom beyond. Though I had decided that there would be nothing supernatural to hear, should there be, I must certainly die a most dreadful death of sheer terror if I had to stop and fumble with keys and bolts before escaping into the passage to call for help.

I disliked Mrs. Walsh, but I was not sorry to remember that she had mentioned occupying a room in

the same wing with me. She would be awful to look upon in night attire without the red false front; but she would be beautiful indeed compared to a ghostly visitant.

Leaving the door at last merely latched, I busied myself in putting away the few poor little possessions which Mr. Thomas Nye had carried in my bag from the cottage to the hall. Later I found a few novels placed for my benefit, perhaps, on the shelves of a glass-fronted bookcase in the sitting-room. I was in no mood for light reading, but it was better to read than to think, and I did read until very late.

I am ashamed to say that the gas burned dimly in my bedroom during all that night, and I was thankful, through troubled wakings and snatches of fitful slumber, that it was gas, and not a candle to flicker out while darkness still curtained the world.

But morning stole under my window-blinds at length, and there had been no sound in the rooms save those of my own restless tossing and turning, no horrors save those conjured up by my imagination. I rose before eight, feeling weary and fagged, with a wiry headache that picked at the nerves in my temples like fingers at the strings of a banjo. After my bath I grew more alive, however, and pride kept me from complaining to Mrs. Walsh when she brought me a boiled egg, with tea and toast.

Still less would I have dwelt upon my self-made tortures to Mr. Raynor, when I went to him at ten o'clock. The post had lately arrived, it seemed, and among several unimportant letters, which must be read

aloud to my employer, there was one for me, from Miss Smith.

"I have been making inquiries about your Mr. Raynor," she brusquely began. "Nobody knows anything about him, though he must have had references which satisfied Marmaduke Yorke's agent, or Arrish Hall wouldn't have been let to him, even for the small sum at which the owner is glad to be rid of it. But this much is known; the man seemed in a tremendous hurry to get a house in this particular neighbourhood, and all arrangements were made in the course of a few days.

"That, I think, is against him," the letter proceeded. "Why couldn't he do things like other people? and, above everything, why should he want to live at Arrish Hall? The more I think of it, the less suitable does it seem to me that a young girl should be allowed to stop at such a gloomy place, in the employment of a person who may be a coiner or—anything, for what one knows. Make some excuse and come away. I wouldn't mention that I had a friend in the neighbourhood, if I were you, until I had decided on what steps I meant to take, and arranged to take them; for this Mr. Raynor may try to keep you close if he has a suspicion that you are subject to outside influence.

"Say this letter calls you from Arrish Hall at once. It isn't likely that, as Mr. Raynor is blind, the postmark will be noticed. There'll be a corner ready for you here whenever you like to come, the sooner the better. If to-day won't do, what do you say to to-morrow?"

"James, my servant, who gave me my letters, mentioned that there was one for you," mildly observed Mr. Raynor. " I trust there is no bad news?"

"Oh no, not exactly bad," I faltered.

"Something distressing, I fear, from your tone. James noticed that the Lull postmark was on the letter. I am glad that you have friends in the neighbourhood. It will make it pleasanter for you in the future. I don't want to make you a recluse, Miss—er—Burns."

I experienced a guilty pang. I did not mean to take Miss Smith at her word; but I felt, somehow, it must be my fault that she had misjudged him. Even if it had not been for the salary, I would not have left the unfortunate invalid in the lurch, after all his kindly consideration of me, no matter how mysteriously disagreeable his house might be.

I was ashamed that I had intended to adopt the advice received in my letter, keeping my friendship with Miss Smith from Mr. Raynor; and I was half glad, by way of self-punishment, that the small secret had discovered itself. So far from wishing to shut me up from outside influences, he was opening the door for me unasked.

"I know Miss Smith, of The Pines, a mile from here," I confessed, with belated frankness. "The letter is from her. If you don't object, I should be glad to walk over there this afternoon, when you are not needing me. I'd only be away for an hour and a half at most."

Perhaps I was mistaken, but it seemed to me that

Mr. Raynor's face changed ever so slightly under the green shade.

"Oh, of course, of course, if you desire it," he said. "But listen to the rain beating against the window. It will be a bad day, Mrs. Walsh prophesies. What should I do if you took a cold, and lost your voice, so that for days I was deprived of the pleasure of listening to it—the one pleasure which my wrecked life can hold? I suppose you would not be willing to write your friend a cordial little note, saying that, if the weather permits, you will spend the day with her to-morrow?"

"Certainly, I will write to-day instead of going," I hastened to assure Mr. Raynor. "It does not matter at all. To-morrow will do quite as well for a visit, as Miss Smith doesn't expect me at any particular time."

"Thank you, thank you," Mr. Raynor ejaculated, with such disproportionate display of gratitude that again I felt quite guilty, as if I too had done the poor old man an injustice.

I read aloud to him—letters, newspapers, a new volume of travel by a famous man—until lunch-time. Then I was free for an hour, before I should begin a favourite poem of Browning's to continue until four o'clock. I lunched in my sitting-room, and afterwards scribbled a hurried note to Miss Smith, which Mr. Raynor had already offered to let his man take by hand to The Pines for me.

I drew her letter from my pocket, to use as a reference in writing to her, and noticed something which

I had not seen in the hurry of opening it earlier in the day. The envelope had apparently been inadequately sealed, for the flap—which I had cut across the top—had now almost entirely come off.

If Mr. Raynor had not been blind, and had taken any special interest in my insignificant affairs, he might easily have read the letter before I came down, without my knowing anything about it. But he was blind, and, besides, my correspondence could be of no possible importance to my employer, or anyone else in his odd household. I did not feel in the least apprehensive, when I came to think the matter over, lest the letter had been tampered with.

And even if James's eye had slyly glanced over the lines before mine had seen them, I could not see that any real harm had been done. It was not my fault that Miss Smith had cautioned me against the master of Arrish Hall, and invited me to abandon my engagement in favour of a visit to her.

Mr. Raynor's prophecy regarding the weather proved true. All day long the rain fell. When I went down to begin a course of Browning, at about three o'clock, a fire had been lighted in the room where the blind man sat. Though we were in the first days of August, the small blaze was welcome, and gave a much-needed, if superficial, appearance of cheerfulness to the dull, musty room.

I was invited to remain with Mr. Raynor for tea, and accepted with concealed reluctance; but he made the time pass agreeably enough with tales of India, by which I should have been much entertained had I

been in a state to care for anything outside my own self-absorbing troubles; and he displayed a flattering desire to draw from me particulars regarding my past life and my interests.

Again, we met at dinner, in a gloomy dining-room, James waiting upon us, and Mr. Raynor kept me for an hour or more at the piano afterwards.

At last, when he seemed willing to let me rest, I rose. I was tired after last night's wakefulness, and fancied hopefully that even the memory of Mrs. Walsh's ghost-stories would not keep me from sleeping now.

"If you don't care to hear any more singing, I think I'll ask permission to go, Mr. Raynor," I said.

"Certainly; I trust I have not been too exacting. But stop one moment before you leave me, Miss Burns. I want you to do me a little favour."

I waited in expectancy. Mr. Raynor's curious, broken voice sounded almost eager.

CHAPTER XXV

A GLASS OF GREEN CHARTREUSE

"THE fire is out, I can tell by the chill in the air," went on the blind man. "You are cold, I know, and your voice sounds tired when you speak. To please me, you will drink a glass of this green chartreuse."

He put out his hand, and groped along the table close to his arm-chair. The faithful James placed within his master's reach a tray containing a delicate little liqueur-flask and two small glasses, one amber-coloured, the other red. I felt sure as I glanced at these dainty things that they must have been among the possessions brought down from London by Mr. Raynor.

"Thank you, you are very kind, but I would rather not have it," I objected hastily. "I have not been used to wine or liqueurs of any kind, and they go to my head. I am sure I shall be better without it."

"Let me prescribe for you," urged Mr. Raynor. "This is an exceptional case. You cannot be too careful of a voice like yours, and green chartreuse is especially beneficial. I had it brought out on purpose. As you are going to your room, it cannot matter if it does 'go to your head,' as you say, but will only

tend to make you sleep the more soundly—a sweet, long sleep, without dreams."

"A sweet sleep, without dreams!" I echoed sadly. "I should be glad of that. I do not like to dream —lately. Still, I really don't think I need the liqueur, and——"

"If you wish me to sleep you will drink it," interpolated the blind man. "I feel you have done too much for me. I have a sense of responsibility, and I am anxious lest you should have caught a cold. I may be fussy, but I can't help it, and you might be kind, to set my mind at rest."

"Oh, if I can do that so easily," I exclaimed, smiling, "I will drink the liqueur with pleasure, and risk the consequences."

"Thank you," he said, though thanks seemed due entirely from the other side.

He poured the bright emerald liquid into the ruby glass, with remarkable skill and precision for a blind man, and extended it to me without spilling a drop, then filled the amber glass for himself.

As he did so I noticed that the long white hand trembled. I wished that his hand had been of a different shape. It reminded me—only slightly, but still too much—of another hand I had once seen, and had some cause to remember.

"You will drink it all?" urged Mr. Raynor. "It is no use to prescribe, you know, unless the patient faithfully obeys orders."

"I will do my best," I said, and sipped the liqueur, which I had never tasted before.

It was sweet and strong, and rather nice, though there was a faint suspicion of bitterness underneath the syrupy sweetness. I would gladly have set the little glass down half emptied, but it seemed a shame to cheat the poor blind eyes that could not see whether I kept faith or not, and so I loyally drained the liqueur almost to the last drop.

"Good-night," said Mr. Raynor. "I wish you that long, dreamless sleep which you desire."

I thanked him, and rang the bell for James, who would help his master to bed. By the time I had gone half-way upstairs I was already sleepy, and when I had reached my own rooms the thought of bed began to seem the most important thing in the world.

Before to-night, in the long days that had passed since my banishment from fairyland, the moment I had found myself alone, cruel memory had knocked loudly at the door of my heart, refusing to be denied. But now I thought of nothing, cared for nothing, save rest.

I made myself ready for bed as quickly as I could, half asleep as I undressed. I was not afraid of ghosts that rapped to be let out of walls, or rubbed the blood-stains from floors, to-night, and I locked the one door in my bedroom, though more mechanically—because at other houses I had been accustomed to doing so—than because I preferred the additional security.

The first night of my arrival I had found my window, which was a double one, tightly closed, excluding all fresh air, and I had hastened to open both sashes. To-night, though I had mentioned to Mrs. Walsh in

the morning that I always slept with my window open, it was closed again.

The atmosphere felt heavy and dead, though the night was so chill for August; and, tired as I was, at the last moment, before putting out my gas, the desirability of obtaining fresh air occurred to me.

I went to the window and tried to open it, but the fastening would not yield, and at last I was obliged to give up the attempt in despair. I could hear the wail of wind and rain outside the closed panes, and I consoled myself with the drowsy reflection that, after all, perhaps things might be best as they were.

A moment more and I was in bed in the dark, forgetful of the precaution I had taken the night before against supernatural marauders.

"A long, sweet, dreamless sleep!" I repeated to myself, as I closed my eyes. "That is what one might say of death."

It was my last waking thought, for I had hardly drawn breath before I was fathoms deep in slumber.

* * * * * * *

How long I had slept I do not know, but I was wrenched awake with a feeling as if my nerves had been torn and left quivering, bleeding.

It was a sensation poignant as the parting of soul and body while it lasted. My brain seemed to be whirling on a merry-go-round; I could feel the wheels, and see them.

For a moment I lay still, panting, and I do not think that I even knew who I was; I was conscious only of the thing called "I," which felt bruised and

battered. So the whirligig went on; then, as it slowed, I began to remember that I was Consuelo Brand. I had run away from home—no, not from home, but from happiness. I was at an old house in Dorsetshire—somebody's secretary. Whose? Oh, a blind man's! His name was Raynes, or Raynor, or something like that. I was very miserable—the most miserable girl in all the world! Oh, why hadn't I stayed asleep and forgotten it for awhile?

Yes, why hadn't I stayed asleep? What had waked me? That something had—something outside myself—I grew more and more sure as I came slowly, painfully, to myself. My brain had never felt this before, except once. I remembered that time well, for the same physical sensations brought it vividly back.

It was after my dear mother's sudden death. The shock had been almost too much for me, child as I was; and, besides, I had been feeling ill in the train, while I thought she only slept—before I knew that she would never open her eyes on earth again. I had been almost mad with grief at the loss of her—my only one—and for several nights I had not been able to sleep, not even to lose the consciousness of grief for a single moment.

Then the doctor had given me a preparation of laudanum. At first I had fallen dead asleep, but some sound in the street had waked me, and I had gone wellnigh out of my mind.

Instead of dozing once more, the drug had worked like madness in my brain. I was wide, staring awake, with a horrible, unnatural wakefulness, that had ap-

peared to double the keenness of every sensation until it became an agony. I must never take laudanum again, the doctor had pronounced, when he had been called in, for it was evident that it affected me strangely, exciting instead of calming my nerves, after I had slept off the first heaviness in a few moments of stupor.

The case had struck him as being rather remarkable, and he had told me, in the hope of turning my attention for a little from the one subject on which I brooded, that he had written it down, and was sending the account to a medical magazine, where I might see it if it would interest me.

Now history repeated itself in my throbbing brain. As I had felt on that night, more than five years ago, I felt to-night.

Oh, how horrible everything seemed in the darkness that almost choked me! All I had suffered during the past week came over me in waves; I was overwhelmed with the crushing weight of my own agony. The great love I had felt for George Seaforth, and the bitterness which had taken its place, were like two spirits that had brooded above me, reminding me in whispered accents of my intolerable loss—the hopelessness of all my future.

"It won't be like this when morning comes," I tried to think. "Things are always more terrible in the dead of night. You must bear it now, and——"

The last words were choked back. There was a sound of something moving in the room. I knew now what had waked me. It had been such a sound as

this—stealthy, slow, soft, yet unmistakable—a sound of rubbing.

My heart stood still—not figuratively, for I believe that for a long, long second it did stop beating.

The Thing had come. It was in the room with me. But to save my life, to save my very soul, I could not have moved, or uttered the faintest moan.

I heard the Thing—a hand rubbing, rubbing along a surface that was smooth; I heard my heart when, with a great bound, it began to beat again—thump, thump—like a hammer against my side.

"It will kill me," I said to myself. "I shall die hearing it, though it doesn't come any nearer. My heart will stop again, and that will be—the end."

A little while ago I had believed that I wanted to die; that death would be sweet, since youth and the joy of life were over for me. But I did not wish to die now—not like this. Oh, Heaven, not like this!

All my being concentrated in the act of listening; I became an Ear. The sound which I had first heard continued. It was like a hand rubbing up and down on a surface of wood. After a moment it ceased, and the stealthy noise of a cautiously-opening door followed. I had a sensation of prickling at the roots of my hair.

To-night my bedroom door was locked, and the key had been left in. I remembered that, and I had a dim impression that I had sleepily shot the bolt as well. The door might be broken, but no human being could in any other way open it from the other side.

Yet there was no other door, save only that of the

cedar-lined wardrobe, and it was certain that nobody had been concealed there, for I had happened to hang up my gown on one of the hooks before I went to bed.

Where did the noise come from? I lost all sense of direction, and tried in vain to remember in the darkness how the bed stood in connection with the other furniture of the room. My recollections of the place had turned to chaos, and all the while I could hear a soft sound of breathing.

Then, suddenly a board in the old floor creaked under a footstep. My heart leaped until the bounding blood in my veins well-night choked me; but it was intensest relief I felt, not added fear. Surely a material board would not groan under the light, immaterial weight of a spirit foot.

The presence in my room must be human, like myself. How it had come there I could not guess, but the conviction held; and as my horror of the supernatural faded, my mind worked quickly. I thought of the housekeeper, with her false hair and blinking eyes. Perhaps she had only told me the ghostly stories to prepare the way for this episode. She had some sly reason for wishing to enter my room in the night, and she hoped, if by chance I lay awake, to be taken for a ghost. I hoped desperately that the breathing, the footsteps, meant only Mrs. Walsh, for I was not afraid of her.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FLASH OF LIGHT ON A WHITE HAND

AFTER the board creaked all was still for a long moment. Somebody was waiting, listening to find out if the noise had roused the sleeper.

My dry lips half formed the words, "Who is there?" but though a faint flush of returning life and courage warmed my veins, I was still almost powerless, after the shock I had received. Besides, I felt dimly that silence was safer; and perhaps even if I could have uttered the words I should have refrained.

My suspense was soon broken. Out of the darkness a ray of light was born—a slim, straight, yellow ray that grew as it travelled, while at the same time a just perceptible odour of hot metal and burning oil reached my nostrils.

I had never seen a dark lantern, but instinct told me that I watched the working of some such thing now. And ghosts did not carry dark lanterns.

The light was moving toward the bed. A second or two more and it would find my face. Those eyes which I could not see, would fain know whether mine were open, staring through the darkness. When they saw that I was awake—what then?

What if it were not the housekeeper paying a visit

of curiosity, but a thief, who would stab me rather than I should have the chance of raising an alarm?

By a strong effort I closed my lids. I shall never forget how long they were in meeting, how stiff they felt.

The light had caught my face now. It filtered beneath my lowered lashes, and I felt that, despite my determination to lie passive, they flickered nervously.

My sensitive hearing could detect a faint rustling as the bed-covering rose and fell over my wildly-beating heart.

I strove to make my breathing regular and natural as that of a peaceful sleeper, but it whistled in my own ears, and it seemed that I could not possibly deceive other ears, sharpened by suspicion, as mine by fear.

But, after remaining stationary for a time that appeared interminable to me, the light moved away, the soft pad, pad of slippered feet began once more. Assured that I slept, perhaps their owner was not quite as cautious as before.

Stiffly again, I opened my eyes, with something like the mechanical jerk of a French doll's. Oddly, I thought of the simile, even in that moment of suspense and fear.

The darkness was not as intense as it had been, for the lantern had not closed, but was still moving like a will-o'the-wisp in a marsh at night. It had gone further away from the bed now, and while I lay waiting for the thing that should happen next, a hand came under the yellow ray—a long, pale hand

opening the drawer of my dressing-table. My heart grew sick, for it was the hand of my blind employer, Mr. Raynor. If he had been really blind, he would not have needed a lantern to light him on his secret expedition. It had been a lie, then—a monstrous fraud from beginning to end—built up with deadly purpose. Mr. Raynor was not blind! Even at this instant, I knew that his eyes were helping his hands in a search for something of mine that he wished to see. Either the man was mad, and had advertised for a secretary because of some morbid motive which I could not fathom, or else——

The thought of that something else chilled the blood that rushed so wildly through my veins.

"A long, sweet, dreamless sleep!" I could hear Mr. Raynor's strangely-muffled voice murmuring the wish as he pressed me to drink the green chartreuse. It was easy to find an inner meaning in that wish now —easy to see why he had urged me to drink the liqueur, refusing to accept a denial. No wonder I had waked with the same horrible sensations which had racked my brain after taking that dose of laudanum years ago. A few drops of the drug at the bottom of the ruby-coloured glass had given the curious bitter "undertone" I had detected, unsuspiciously attributing it to some disagreeable quality in an unfamiliar drink.

With most people the small dose would have induced a sound sleep, not to be broken by ordinary noises; and the man who had administered it could not possibly have guessed that I should be a somewhat remarkable exception to the rule. Had he meant to

kill me, I wondered, or would he have been satisfied to have me to sleep while he explored my room for the thing which he had gone to such lengths in his desire to obtain? I could not answer this question, but I was sure that, if my employer at Arris Hall were the person I began to take him for, he would not hesitate to remove any obstacle which threatened his success.

He, who had so far carried out his plans with such skill, would be clever enough to account for my death, if it were necessary that I should die, without drawing suspicion upon himself. Mr. Raynor, a helpless blind man, would not easily be suspected of a crime, committed seemingly without a motive. It would be shown that I had killed myself; a letter would be found, perhaps, with a confession. I could almost see that letter as my mind projected itself into the future —a future in which I as a living, breathing, human being might have no part.

As my thoughts travelled, the light moved slowly, purposefully about the room. By the stealthy sounds I heard, I judged that every drawer had been opened and thoroughly searched. My clothing, folded on a chair, was examined; I could guess why now. The man hoped to find certain papers, which I might have sewn into one of my garments. Once I opened my eyes far enough to see that the pocket of my black dress, taken from the cedar wardrobe where I had hung it up, was being turned wrong side out.

I shuddered with horror as instinct told me that presently Mr. Raynor—who was Mr. Wynnstay as well—would come creeping cautiously to the bed, and

feel for what he wanted under the pillow. He would look elsewhere first, it was probable, for there would be the risk of arousing me, which he would doubtless be glad to avoid; but in the end he would come. When that happened, I could no longer trust myself to simulate sleep. He must discover that I was awake, that I had been watching him, and then—I dared not think what he would be likely to do then.

I waited for the dreaded moment to come. I experienced a strange clarity of mental vision, looking back into the past. I was sure now, when it was too late to escape the consequences of credulity—more sure than I had been when I met those eyes that did not match, in the convex mirror—that I had not seen Mr. Wynnstay for the first time at Holland Park Mansions. He had been the kind old clergyman in the train long ago, who lent papers to my mother and me.

He had been as skilful, as calculating of future consequences, then as he had shown himself of late. I believed now that he had somehow been an active agent in my mother's death. Perhaps he had not meant to do murder, but he had determined to obtain any papers which she might have with her, and probably had obtained the letter which had excited her before starting on our journey that morning, as certainly it had disappeared. How he had contrived to administer any drug or poison, I could not tell, but I believed that he had done so, and my mother, who suffered from heart disease, had readily fallen a victim to it.

That night at Holland Park Mansions, when I had

walked into his net, he had made another attempt to possess himself of the papers which he fancied I might carry about my person. Or, perhaps, failing that, he would have put me out of the way of those he served. I should never be sure what had been in his mind that night; but soon I should know what was his ultimate purpose now. For since then I had sealed my own fate, and he had gone too far to let himself fail at last.

The light that guided me to these deductions showed me that I owed my present position to the deception I had practised upon Diana Dunbar at Southwood Park. I had told her then that I had found the secret drawer of the Chippendale escritoire, and that henceforth the papers I had discovered there should never leave me.

I guessed now that Mr. Wynnstay had been with her that night, waiting in the carriage which had brought her to Southwood, no doubt. She had given him a rapid account of all that passed between us, adding that, if I discovered her version of the Seaforth story to be true, I would leave Sir George's house — according to my own threat — without delay.

She, possibly, had gone back to the house where she and Lady Dunbar had been staying, while the man had deemed it worth his while to wait upon my movements.

No small, lurking creature of the night had made the rustling I had heard in the shrubbery when I had stolen out of the house an hour later. My enemy

had been watching, taking it for granted that I would keep my word; and he had not been disappointed.

Others had failed, or had not cared, to find me. But he had not failed; while I fancied myself safe from pursuit, sadly congratulating myself on skilfully covering my tracks, he had followed. He had known from the first where I had gone, and had laid his plans accordingly.

Once assured that I was in the neighbourhood of The Pines, waiting for Miss Smith's return, he would have had time to look for a house not too far away, and take it. Mr. Raynor's haste to secure Arrish Hall and move in was fully explained now.

Mr. Raynor had chosen to be blind because a green shade of goodly dimensions, like charity, covered a multitude of sins and obscured his features. Mr. Raynor sat always in twilight, to render assurance doubly sure, unwilling to test his grizzled disguise too severely. He had shown himself clever at disguise a few years ago, but would not trust his luck too much.

Mr. Raynor had talked with a muffled voice lest I should remember Mr. Wynnstay's accents; and Mr. Raynor's hands had been pallid because those of Mr. Wynnstay, whose shape could not be changed, had been of a more natural, healthy tint.

How I had walked into the trap of the advertisement, meant solely to attract me, though I had modestly feared to lose the chance in favour of someone worthier! I wondered at my own stupidity, telling myself fiercely that it was I who had been blind, not my employer; but then I reflected that the plot had

been clever enough to deceive one more worldly-wise than I.

There had been every reason why I should believe the new master of Arrish Hall genuine, none why I should self-consciously attribute his presence in Dorsetshire, his advertisement, his preference for my voice above other applicants', to a deep-laid scheme against my liberty, perhaps my life.

One small flash of insight into the past and its connection with the present led up to another, and at the end of five minutes—it could scarcely have been more—I felt that I held all but a complete chain in my hands, joined by a series of links, only one missing here and there.

I could almost have wished that the chain had not been so complete, for it was dreadful to lie there, piecing it together, link by link, realizing more and more how slowly, yet relentlessly, the enemy's hand had closed upon me, until I was completely in his power. He could do with me as he liked. No one would ever know the truth.

Now he was standing nearer, still cautiously, lest I should wake, the slippered feet treading as softly as those of a cat. The moment I had feared was coming.

I tried to brace myself, to control the sudden trembling that shook me from head to foot. But it was useless. As soon as the man bent over me, he would know that I was awake.

He had approached within a yard of the bed, when I felt the light of the lantern he held creeping over

my body, up towards my face. Instantly I closed my eyes, which had been half open.

The light reached them, then—very suddenly—disappeared. I could not resist peeping again, and to my astonishment I saw that, instead of coming closer to the bed, the yellow ray which told of the presence was moving towards the door which led into the adjoining sitting-room. Another second or two, and I heard the key softly turning in the lock. Mr. Wynnstay-Raynor had changed his mind, and was going to search there before running the final risk of waking me up.

I remembered now that I had left my small travelling-bag in the next room; maybe he had looked for it, and, not finding it in the bedroom, wished to make sure that the papers he wanted were not hidden away in some inner compartment of the bag.

Now, if ever, I was to have my one chance of escape. I thought of the window, and despairingly recalled the fact that it had been fastened too tightly for me to move the sash, when I had tried. There was no hope there. Yet, somehow, this man had stolen into my room, though the one door had been locked until he unlocked it an instant ago. If I could find the way out before he returned disappointed from his quest in the sitting-room, I might go as he had come.

Without waiting to think the matter over, I sprang from the bed, and groped along the wall, in the darkness. Suddenly and unexpectedly—for its position was changed—my hand touched the great cedar-lined wardrobe. It no longer stood close against the wall,

but had been pushed, at one corner, a foot or two farther out than before.

In the fraction of a second I had fathomed the mystery of the man's intrusion. The enormous piece of furniture had been imported to my room for the express purpose of concealing a door behind it. Through that door Mr. Wynnstay had come; through that door I might hope even now to escape.

I forced my body into the aperture between the wardrobe and the wall. Yes, there was the door, and it was open. What lay beyond I did not know, for all was darkness on the other side; but I did not pause for that. I slipped through and shut the door. My fingers felt for a key in the lock, and turned it, though they trembled.

As I drew back my hand and stood hesitating in the dark, not knowing which way to turn, I heard the creaking of a board. It was on the other side of the door I had just closed, in the room I had left. Mr. Wynnstay had returned to the bedroom, and by this time he knew that I was gone—how I had gone!

My only hope now lay in eluding him before he could rush out the other way, through my sitting-room, and head me off in this mysterious region, which he doubtless knew well, I not at all.

Stifling a cry that rose to my lips, I ran forward, with my hands outstretched, lest I should blunder against some object in my path. But the place seemed empty, for I touched nothing, and at last, more by luck than skill, I reached a door. To my joy, it opened, and I came out into a room sparsely furnished, and

faintly lighted by a jet of gas. There was a bed which had not been slept in; under the shaded gas-jet, a table, where lay a mass of streaked, black-and-white hair, and the green shade which blind Mr. Raynor had worn over his eyes. These things I saw in one flashing glance, almost unconsciously, for I thought only of escape.

I had no means of knowing where the next door might lead me, in this intricate old house; only too likely that I might stumble upon the enemy lying in wait to spring upon me at the moment when I hoped for safety. But I darted through a door opposite the one by which I had come in, and just outside struck against a table.

Something fell from it as I rushed past. Involuntarily my hand went out to save it and prevent a crash. I touched and grasped a candle-stick, which must have stood upon the table by the door. A candle had fallen half out, but I thrust it back into place, and, groping, found the box of matches which had lain beside it. Here, at last, was one piece of good fortune!

I struck a match, which flickered and went out. Another, which flared up as I held it to the charred wick of the candle. As an answering flame sputtered and rose into a pale star of light, the darkness of the distance was suddenly broken.

With a great start I looked up. At the end of a long passage I saw a man's figure in a long dressing-gown, and a lantern, wide open now, throwing a strong light ahead.

For a moment I stood staring, fascinated, powerless to move. With great springing strides, noiseless as a panther's, save when a loose board creaked under the slippered feet, he came hurrying, and it was only when he was close upon me that I shook myself free from the stupor. With a loud scream, I flung the heavy candlestick full into his face, and, turning, ran from him down the passage.

I heard the candlestick crash on the bare floor; I heard him stumble; and I heard the curse he uttered.

But in an instant I knew that he was coming after me. Still I ran, going I knew not where, hurrying hither and thither in the dark, like a leaf blown by the storm; and always my own wild shrieks rang in my ears as if they had been uttered by someone else.

Before I guessed that I had reached them I was on the stairs. I had been going too fast to save myself, and, though I caught by instinct at the balusters, I pitched down, head foremost.

There was a noise below, which went on and on as I fell, and seemed to be a part of the fall, as were the stars that rained in a cataract before my eyes while my head struck, again and again; yet I knew that it was really not part of it, but separate —quite separate, and far away.

"Thank God I'm to die like this, not by his hands!" I thought, in the confusion of my senses.

And then, with a great thud, all the stars went out.

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTERWARDS

"WELL, and how is she now?" asked a brisk voice.

"Quieter since midnight—much quieter," answered another.

"And he—is he resting?"

"I persuaded him to go away, about half an hour ago, for a nap. He's a wreck, poor fellow! but so happy to see her better. It's quite pitiful. If she lives, it will be he who saved her—after you, of course, doctor."

"Not after me, Miss Smith. He has done everything, I very little."

Somebody lay listening to the words. I wondered dimly who the somebody was that seemed to hear with my ears. I wondered, too, whose life had been saved, and who had saved it, and who these people were that talked about it. The first voice was a man's, the other a woman's. Someone had called someone else "Miss Smith."

I had known a Miss Smith in another world, long, long ago, before I had come to live in a place where everybody's head always ached, and noises roared in their ears, and red and black clouds stitched with glittering streaks of light hung before their eyes.

I wanted to remember something about the old times when I had known Miss Smith, for it appeared vaguely that many important matters were connected with that name. But trying to remember hurt my head, and wheels began whirring round in my brain, though the red and black clouds were gone.

Because it hurt to remember, tears gathered thickly in my eyes—or somebody's eyes that were not exactly mine, but might have been once—and as they fell they were burning hot. Suddenly I knew that they had turned to molten iron, and were scarring my cheeks as they ran down, making great furrows in the flesh.

There was only one person in the world who could stop them from falling, for he could do anything. The person had no name, but his hands were strong as steel; I could not rest for a moment without him. Why didn't he come? How cruel of him to leave me alone to suffer like this, when he knew very well that he was the only one in this new, horrible world who could help me!

"Where is he? where is he?" somebody was moaning. "Oh, I shall die if he doesn't come now—now—now!"

Somebody's voice sounded oddly weak and broken. It was pitiful; it made me cry a great deal more.

"Oh, why doesn't he come?"

"Here I am, my own," said a voice, that made the hot iron stop falling over my face, as if it had been checked by magic. "Here I am; I won't leave you again."

I put out my arms, and dimly I could see that

they were thin little things, which waved feebly, quite different from what they had been when I lived in the world. Other arms, that were firm and strong, slipped under my shoulders, and I nestled against something better than the pillow, far more restful, though I could not understand why, because it kept beating, beating, just like a bird which struggled to escape from a hand that held it.

As I lay I could look up at a haggard face. It was brownish-white, with hollows in its cheeks, and bluish marks under its eyes, that were sunken into hollows. Its chin was all dark and rough with a short stubbly beard, which had a dent, or a dimple, or something in the middle, like a blacker shadow than the rest; and suddenly this struck me as very funny. I laughed, and laughed, foolishly.

"How queer you look!" I babbled. "What a face! You're a fright—a fright! Did you know that? But I like you. Who are you? I keep wondering, and it makes my head ache so."

"Only somebody who loves you dearly, darling," said the voice that belonged to the haggard face. It was a very kind, soothing voice, though it shook a little.

"I don't see what's to become of you, if this is to go on," another thinner voice whispered, almost fretfully. "You haven't had six hours' sleep in a fortnight. It's more than human nature can stand. Just as she's getting a little better, you'll break down, and then——"

"No, I shan't break down," said the face's voice. "Don't you know it's life for me to think that she

needs me, that she calls for me when I leave her side? I couldn't break down while she wants me."

"I want you, I want to know who you are," the voice which was partly mine repeated.

One day I waked up and looked all round a cool, pleasant room in a strange house. I was in bed, and my hands were very little and white. A woman in a gray dress like a nurse's uniform sat by me and waved a fan.

Somebody had walked away as I opened my eyes, but I did not feel enough curiosity to turn and see who it was. I was hungry, and demanded things to eat.

The gray woman gave me soup, which was rather nice; and when I asked questions afterwards, she said that I had been very ill, but was fast getting better now; I was at a friend's house, and there was nothing to worry about. If I were good, I should know everything I wanted to know in a day or two.

So I was good; and often I had soup and other things. But I could not be certain how long it was before a nice ugly old lady came and smiled at me over the nurse's shoulder. I knew her at once, and said so.

"Why, you're plain Miss Smith!" I exclaimed, and wondered why she laughed.

I was at her house, it seemed, and I was glad, though I was rather angry with her because she would not let me try to remember how I came there.

Presently, when I was stronger and had begun to

sit up, Anne Bryden came, and often she sat with me for a long time quite alone when the nurse was walking or resting, for I did not need much watching now. Once, when she thought I had been asleep, I was really thinking.

"Why did you write me a cold letter, Anne?" I asked; "I can't remember what it was about now, but it made me feel so sad and lonely the day I had it."

To my surprise, she burst out crying. "Oh, I've been punished enough for what I did!" she sobbed. "Can you ever forgive me? it's all my fault!"

But at this moment the nurse came in and scolded Anne in a low voice, telling her she must have more self-control. Anne was not left alone with me after that.

It seemed, when I first began to try, that I should have to learn how to walk all over again, and my hair had been cut off short. I felt it with my fingers, and it covered my head in short rings not much longer than a baby's. It had been still shorter, but it had begun to grow very fast, the nurse told me, and she did not think it was coming out any darker; with which information she seemed to consider I should be very pleased.

Miss Smith gave me a pink silk dressing-gown trimmed with lace. I must try to get some colour to match it in my cheeks, she said. The second day that I wore it I was looking at some flowers which had just been sent in (there were flowers every day, quantities of them, "and such beauties, all out of season!" I had heard the nurse exclaim), when Miss

Smith appeared to ask if I were well enough to see an old friend. Lady Sophie de Gretton had come to call on me because she could not wait any longer, and she had been staying at a hotel near by for a week, hoping to be given this opportunity.

A shudder ran through me from head to foot, and the floodgates of memory were suddenly burst open; but I pressed my lips together, and did not speak for a moment. I was so well and strong again now that I could bear the shock, or I suppose Miss Smith and the doctor, talking it over again as they surely had, would not have let Lady Sophie come.

"Yes, I will see her; I shall be glad," I said at last, and the door opened.

How all the old times rushed back, how the old days crowded round me like pale ghosts, as the handsome, elegantly-dressed woman moved silkily in!

She was very quiet, very subdued in her manner; no doubt she had had her instructions.

"Poor little girl!" she said softly, and patted my thin hand as she sat down by my sofa. The nurse and Miss Smith had gone out. We were alone together.

"It is good of you to come," I said. "I want you to tell me of things; will you?"

"Yes," she answered. "They said I might answer any question you asked, for you have been patient, and you are practically well now, only very weak, and they thought if you saw me it might bring things back in a safe way. They thought, too, you might rather ask me than most other people, because I knew all the circumstances from the beginning. And we were very

good friends once; do say we are so still, for I have been very unhappy, and shall be so till things between us are as they were before."

"We are friends," I responded; "it is good to see you again. But, you know, things can never be as they were before; I remember everything—everything now. I have just got to live my life the best I can, as I am to get well. I wonder how I got well? How did I escape from that awful house, that awful man? I am afraid of him still; I have seen his face in dreams; it haunts me always, and did even before I could recall where I had seen it, what it meant to me."

"You need not be afraid of him any more," said Lady Sophie; "he is dead. He has shot himself. I suppose he saw that not only was the stake he had played for lost, but that his life was hopelessly ruined. Perhaps, too, there was enough decency left in his black heart to make him wish not to involve his friends in his ruin."

"He was a murderer!" I cried. "I know that he killed my mother. Perhaps I could never have proved it. But I feel that it was true, nevertheless. Oh, the horror of that awful night at Arrish Hall! I wonder I have not died of it, even though by some miracle, which I don't understand yet, I was saved."

"You have almost died of it, poor child! You have had brain fever, and for many days and nights no one dreamed that you could live. You couldn't have lived if—if it had not been for one person who nursed you back to life by sheer force of will, it seemed, and a

tremendous power of endurance when everyone else's hope and strength had failed.

"Ah, yes, Sister Milton, the nurse," I echoed. "Miss Smith told me she had been most faithful and devoted."

"No doubt, but I don't mean Sister Milton."

"Who then? Did Miss Smith——"

"I would tell you if you hadn't said one thing a few minutes ago."

"I don't understand. What has that to do with it?"

"You said that nothing could be as it had been before the night at Southwood Park. Of course, I know how you intended me to take that."

I felt the colour stream up to my thin white face.

"I think I have forgiven him," I stammered. "Only, of course, we can never meet. When your ideal is broken, nothing can mend it, you know, Lady Sophie. Sir George Seaforth wasn't the man I had thought him; I wish you hadn't made me speak of him this first day with you, but I can't pretend to misunderstand, and if you mean to try and get me to say I will let him come here, it's useless. I never, never want to see him again."

"Not even if it was he who saved your life—not only once, on the night you spoke of, but a hundred times since, almost losing his own in doing it?"

I stared at her, aghast and dazed.

"It is true," she hurried on. "I am not exaggerating. He ought to tell you himself, but he would not, I know. You would never hear a word of all he has done from his lips. Perhaps, if not he, your

friend Anne Bryden ought to tell you, for part of the story concerns her. But it would be a hard thing for her to confess to you. She has already confessed to me, and conscience has punished her enough, so you shall hear the history of that night, and the six weeks which have passed since—if you care."

"Six weeks!" I repeated. "Six weeks! Oh yes, I do—I do care to hear! But——"

"Don't say any 'buts' until I have finished. I must begin before that night. There's a great deal to tell, and it's hard to know how best to piece together all the bits of the mosaic. You wrote to Anne Bryden after you arrived at Lull, didn't you, and said you thought of waiting at a fisherman's cottage for Miss Smith to come back?"

"Yes," I said mechanically, in my suspense.

"Well, she was the only one who knew where you were. Meanwhile, you can imagine the state of mind George Seaforth was in, and I was almost as bad. I don't think I ever knew George till then—of what depths of feeling he was capable. I think even you would have forgiven him, if you had seen him as I saw him. One of the first things he did, after he had applied for help to Scotland Yard and we had talked over matters together, was to go to Miss Bryden, from whom I thought we might learn something. She had already got your letter, the very day he saw her, it seems; but she told him nothing."

"She knew I would not wish it," I defended Anne.

"No, it was not that. She has told me since why it was. George laid his heart bare to her, humbling

herself, and pleading that if she knew anything of you she would tell it. You would not listen to him, but she did; and she realized that he had not been the cold-blooded, deliberate sinner you had believed him. She felt, she says now, that if you had heard him speak you would not have held out against him. Still, she told him she was absolutely ignorant of your movements. Can you guess why?"

"Not unless it was, somehow, for my sake."

"It was for her own—her own selfishness. The first time that she saw George she admired him above all other men, and she used to dwell upon the thought of him in secret, until it became a sort of fascination. She was jealous of you, because you were beautiful and could win his love, and because at my house you could meet him every day.

"She guessed that he cared for you. When he came to question her, she knew the whole truth of his feeling, of course, and she told herself that she could not give him up to you. He could never be anything to her, but she could not bear that you should have everything she was denied. That was the reason for her silence, and it was a silence which nearly cost you your life."

"Poor Anne!" I murmured. "Poor Anne!"

"How easy it is for you to forgive her! Not that one grudges it to the poor girl, for she has bitterly repented, and done her best to make amends. If she had given George your address at first, you would have been spared the horrors at Arrish Hall. She did not do that, but she had not a peaceful moment after she

had let him go. Her treachery to you was corroding her heart: those are her own words about it to me.

"At last she came to my house and told how she had sinned in omission. She gave me your letter, and begged me to let George know as much of the truth as necessary. Of course, I would not betray the confession of her motive. I telegraphed him at once; he was in Devonshire, following up a misleading clue suggested by the police.

"But before all these developments had come about, something else had happened, which you must hear now, before you can understand how serious a misfortune George and I had reason to think your disappearance. In any case, his grief and remorse would have been terribly hard to bear—anxiety as well; but as it was we feared a great danger for you.

"You had left the drawers of the Chippendale desk scattered over the floor of your room—or, rather, as you had told me, Diana Dunbar had left them so. When I called George to consult with me there, after you had gone, I told him of her visit, what she had said, what she had done. You and he had had a talk about the man Wynnstay; George knew more than I knew of the matter, but I remembered what you had told me of the escritoire.

"We exchanged details of information, and agreed that there was something exceedingly strange under the Dunbars' interest in you, which they appeared to share with their solicitor, Mr. Wynnstay. It was certain that Diana had availed herself of her privileges as George's friend and your acquaintance to gain access

to the room where she thought the desk would be, after hearing of the sale from Wynnstay.

"George would not have touched the escritoire until you should have been brought back; but I was very much excited, very indignant with the Dunbars for everything, and I determined that the desk should not be left alone and at the mercy of their scheming until the secret drawer and the papers which might be hidden in it were found. I am not a patient woman, as you know, and I acted without hesitation.

"I did not wait to search for such a drawer, but I flung the escritoire on the floor before George could stop me, and broke it. I found what I wanted, Consuelo; and it was a discovery worth making."

CHAPTER XXVIII

"RING OUT THE OLD, RING IN THE NEW"

"WHAT was the discovery?" I echoed, with growing interest.

"Wait!" cried Lady Sophie: "that will come by-and-by. There are other things to tell first, but now you can guess why we were anxious about you. A motive was supplied—a motive strong enough to tempt unscrupulous ones to evil things; and though your friends had not been able to trace you, we feared that your enemies might have been better informed from the first.

"When George got my telegram he started at once for Dorsetshire, and went straight to Miss Smith at The Pines. It was about ten o'clock when he reached the house, and she was just going to bed; but when he sent up a message, she dressed again and saw him. You were at Arrish Hall, engaged as secretary, and had written in the afternoon that by your employer's permission you would spend the following day with her.

"There wasn't a scrap of evidence against the man who called himself Raynor, but George, whose suspicions were ready to take fire, was horribly worried and perplexed. He thought it possible that the advertisement, of which Miss Smith told him, might have

been a plot arranged by those who interest it was to secure you and certain things that were yours.

"Still, there was no real reason to believe that your situation was not genuine, and he hardly felt justified in going to Arrish Hall at half-past eleven at night (it would be that or after by the time he could arrive there, as he and Miss Smith had talked for more than an hour), demanding that you should come away with him.

"The house would probably be closed for the night, and the prospect of waking up the sleepers and explaining his errand seemed almost a hopeless one, especially as (if all were well) you would refuse to see him—refuse, perhaps, to hear anything he wished to say.

"Still, he could not rest and take the chances. Some time later he walked over to Arrish Hall, found the house shut up and quiet, only a big dog barking at the intruder. Undecided and miserable, he started to walk away, but he felt irresistibly drawn back, with a horrible feeling that anything might be happening in that lonely house.

"He resolved, finally, to risk all, and rouse the house, rather than have to repent his hesitation too late. As he reached the door he heard a scream from within.

"In another three minutes he had broken in through one of the lower windows, cut and bleeding from the shattered glass, beating off the dog that clung to him and tore at him as he struggled through. Now you know how you were saved. If you want more details,

you shall hear them all some other time; but don't speak yet. There's more to tell.

"Already you were delirious. George carried you to The Pines in his arms. When he would have given you into the care of Miss Smith, believing it better that he should be out of your sight, you clung to him, and would not let him go, though you did not seem to know who he was.

"The doctor—fetched from Lull by a servant—said that it would be dangerous to thwart you; and from that night, for weeks, until you slept naturally and came to yourself again, he never left you for more than an hour on end. If he were sent away to sleep —half dead for want of it as he was—you would call, and your voice would instantly bring him back.

"He was half skeleton, half ghost, at the end of three weeks. How he lived, no one knew, but he hardly seemed to be of flesh and blood—he was iron. He never broke down until you had fallen into a doze, like a child's, one day. Then, when he was not needed, he sank into a chair, half fainting, and cried like a baby—poor, unshaven, gaunt wretch that he was.

"He looked like an escaped convict, who had been lurking, haunted and starved, for a month in the ditches and forest. It will be a long time before he's the man he was, unless you give him the only tonic that can help him—your forgiveness. What do you think, what do you say, Consuelo? Can you forgive George Seaforth now?"

My eyes were streaming tears.

"Where is he?" I asked. "Is he still at Lull?"

"He's in the next room," said Lady Sophie. "Shall I call him?"

I nodded, for I could not speak. When the door opened and someone came in, I could not see for the mist of tears. But I held out my arms, and was clasped closely—oh, so closely, yet so gently, as if I had a butterfly body to break—against the heart that had kept my lamp of life burning from its own flame, during the past blank, yet lurid, weeks.

"Darling—my darling!" whispered the voice that had soothed me in my delirium. "Do you forgive me?"

"Do you forgive me?" I answered. "I love you—I love you so."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CONTENTS OF THE SECRET DRAWER

THAT day I did not care to hear what had been found in the secret drawer of the escritoire, or why —because of what had lain there for so long, and what it meant to me and to others—Lady Dunbar and the man who served her had wished me out of their way. They had gone farther than wishing, there was little doubt; but the man Wynnstay was dead, by his own hand, and Lady Dunbar and Diana had "gone abroad." They went rather suddenly, as I learned when I heard the whole story.

Perhaps James, "Mr. Raynor's" valet, had been far enough in his master's confidence to know that there was an intimate connection between the Dunbars' affairs and Mr. Wynnstay's, and so knowing, had sent a telegram describing the manner of that sudden death at Arrish Hall.

At all events, Lady Dunbar had received a telegram at her cottage in Cowes, had appeared greatly upset, and had directed her maid to pack a few things in haste, as she and her daughter were called immediately abroad.

The maid was left behind, and could give no further information regarding Lady Dunbar and Miss Dun-

bar's movements to inquiring friends, save that they had departed within the hour. But it was ascertained by certain persons employed "on the other side" that the large sum of £20,000 had been withdrawn from her ladyship's bank, and that the mother and daughter had taken a night train for France.

As for me and my interests, I had in the papers found in the escritoire all the materials for a very strong case—a case almost too strong to be contested, especially in the compromising circumstances—which, if successsful, would have proved my right to the name of Dunbar, and everything else that Lady Dunbar and her daughter possessed.

There was my mother's diary, and there were many letters, even one from Lady Dunbar herself, which she might have been glad to reclaim. Joining the details together, a romantic story was made—just such a story as the readers of sensational papers delight in, particularly when such stories concern the aristocracy, their family histories, their peccadilloes and follies, their youthful love-making and middle-aged mistakes.

But this story of the young Viscount who loved and secretly married a singer has never been allowed to reach the public eye till now. The woman and the girl who had tried to injure me I could afford to let go free, rather than set scandal in a blaze about my ears and theirs.

I had George Seaforth's love, and I was going to be his wife. The sooner we could both forget a past which had come near to parting us, the better. I did not need the Dunbar money or the Dunbar name.

I was to be Consuelo Seaforth, and Brand (the name which, my poor mother's diary confessed, had been adopted in sorrow and despair, when she did not know that she had a right to any name at all) was to be laid away with the other things that did not need remembering.

I did not want a *cause célèbre,* and neither, to tell the truth, did George; therefore we spared my enemies, perhaps as much through consideration for ourselves as because we were too happy to desire vengeance.

So it is that the Dunbar money will some day go to the Crown, because the two women who have disappeared into the unknown (where no one troubles to search for them) dare not claim what they left behind, and I will not. It is all well enough to talk about the poetical justice which should overtake the villains of a story, whether in real life or fiction; but it seemed to George and me that we needed to lift no finger towards bringing it upon Lady Dunbar and Diana.

Their punishment—banished from all that had made existence worth having to them; their bitterness of heart; their haunting, never-wholly-absent fear; their shamed knowledge of the malicious gossip which must surely follow their sudden flight, even though the true reason for it were never known—more than satisfied our sense of justice.

And the man Wynnstay had paid the penalty for crimes committed and crimes intended left undone.

Still, in these happy days, when we have put sad-

ness and misunderstandings far behind us, and George and I are travelling round the world on our twelve months' wedding trip, planning what we shall do when we go home—how good we shall be to little Jimmy East; how coals of fire shall be heaped on Cousin Sarah's head; how we shall try to brighten and give colour to Anne Bryden's gray life; how often we shall have "plain Miss Smith" to visit us in town and country—still I think constantly of my beautiful mother, whose love-story was so cruelly different from mine.

Sometimes I read her diary, found in the escritoire, and for an hour live in the past with her. I see her as the popular singer, Margaret Sylvester, though I had never been allowed to hear that "stage name" of hers, except on the night when Lady Dunbar had questioned me, aware only that her maiden name had been Madge Slater; that as a widow, and my mother, she had been called "Mrs. Brand."

I see her "resting," after a hard season in opera, far from the footlights, in a little Scotch village, meeting there Lord Dunbar and his younger brother, travelling with a friend they had made at Oxford—a man older than either of the brothers—Richard Wynnstay.

I see the love-story unfold in the pages of the poor little tear-blotted diary, which speak so eloquently. I even seem to be present in fancy at the Scotch marriage, into which Margaret Sylvester was persuaded, with Lord Dunbar's brother and Richard Wynnstay for the only witnesses.

I enter into her unselfish readiness to keep the mar-

riage secret, because "dearest Eric" would lose the great fortune expected from his mother's brother, a querulous old invalid, if he married an actress; and I am sorry for her as she tries not to wish the invalid's life shortened, that the truth may be proclaimed to the world.

I understand—oh, so well, by light of later developments!—her distrust of Eric's brother, Napier, and of Wynnstay, who persuaded Lord Dunbar that it would be safer to have the marriage simply by agreement, according to Scotch law, rather than "have a clergyman and a real wedding, with everything proper and sweet, like other people."

I cry when I read of the months that follow, when she was in London again and alone, while Lord Dunbar had been induced to accompany his brother and his brother's friend to shoot big game in the Rockies. Still faster do the tears fall when I take in my hands the letter "Eric" wrote her from America, accusing her of terrible things which gossip had said of her. I can guess so well who had started the gossip.

And then, saddest of all, perhaps (for everything might have come right if he had lived), I turn to the paragraphs, cut from old newspapers, telling how my father died in a desperate encounter with a grizzly bear which had turned at bay when shot.

Only the younger brother and his friend had been present, "unable to reach him in time to give him any help." I wonder, as I read, whether those two might not have told a different story had they spoken all the truth? For I know now why they had both

a reason for preventing Lord Dunbar's marriage if they could.

I know that, young as Lord Dunbar's brother was, he had married Richard Wynnstay's sister, a handsome widow, much older than he, and—though he had hidden the marriage from his elder, who would certainly have disapproved—already had a daughter a year or two old. I know that the invalid uncle died during the brother's visit to America, and that the fortune which was left to Lord Dunbar must go to the brother (Napier) if the elder died unmarried.

And so I wonder greatly what was the true history of that scene in the Rockies.

Eric, Lord Dunbar, had always said before meeting the singer, Margaret Sylvester, that his love of sport and travel would keep him from settling down to married life; and Napier had come to believe that his brother would really remain a bachelor. Therefore he had tried to smooth away the difficulties which had arisen through miscalculation as best he could.

After Lord Dunbar's death, and his coming into the title, he had answered a letter from my mother by telling her that her marriage with his brother was not legal; Wynnstay, who was even then a solicitor, adding his verdict to the same effect.

My mother, a girl of twenty, knowing less of the real world than of the mimic world of the stage, had believed their word—believed that the man she had loved so well had deceived her—and, crushed by anguish and humiliation, had left England to hide herself in France.

There I was born, and there we had lived for several years on her savings. It was only when they were gone that Mrs. Brand, a widow, broken in health and spirits, had gone to London to look for work as a teacher of singing.

As I read all this, and live again through the years of poverty and hardship which were my mother's lot, my heart does stir with a desire for vengeance.

But Wynnstay, who found her after she had kept herself hidden from him for so long—Wynnstay, who shared his sister's income—is out of reach; and the others who are left are but poor puppets, after all.

So I shut up the diary, and put away the letters, telling myself that my mother, who loved me, would be happy in my happiness; that, if she were here, she would be the first to say: "Love is everything; let the past rest."

THE END

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